Fate/Zero

Volume 3

The Scattered Ones

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Urobuchi Gen

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First Edition

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Ashes—all that was left in the tragic scene. The place had been thoroughly ruined; one could not tell what the perpetrator had intended to destroy. It seemed like a storm had raged through and wrecked the workshop, leaving nothing to remind a viewer of its former appearance. This was no storm, of course, but deliberate destruction. After all, how could a storm touch this place, an underground water tank? The carnage wrought on Caster's workshop could only have been caused by the power of an anti-army or perhaps an anti-fortress Noble Phantasm.

"Oh God . . . this is too much!"

Uryuu Ryuunosuke could do nothing more than weep and wail in despair as he looked upon the tragic scene. An onlooker might have been moved to sympathy at the sight of his pitiful, agonized form . . . that is, if they knew nothing of him. Ryuunosuke and Caster had been busy hunting fresh meat last night. But they returned to their workshop, flushed with joy, only to be greeted by this scene of utter devastation.

"The art pieces we worked so hard to create . . . it's too much! How could people do such things?!" Ryuunosuke's shoulders shook as he sobbed. Caster gently gathered him into his comforting embrace.

"Ryuunosuke, you have not seen the true evil lurking in the hearts of men; your grief is understandable. What you need to realize is that only a handful can truly comprehend beauty and harmony. The others, the rabble, react with bestial jealousy when exposed to sacred artwork. To them, beautiful things are nothing more than targets to be destroyed."

Naturally, Caster was also furious at the destruction of his sanctum. However, he had no choice but to swallow his anger and calmly accept the situation. After all, he had once been a general leading a nation's armies. His battle intuition told him that it would be dangerous to directly confront an enemy who could wipe out the demons he had posted as sentries and wreck his workshop so thoroughly. That Ryuunosuke had not remained in the workshop last night was also a blessing of sorts. With that in mind, Caster's rage slowly mellowed.

"You need to know that our creations will often be destroyed by these rabble . . . because of that, we cannot be overly sentimental toward our art pieces. Everything we make will inevitably be destroyed. As creators, we should seek joy in the act of creation."

"You mean . . . it doesn't matter if what we make is destroyed, because we can always create again?"

"Exactly! Ryuunosuke, that sharp understanding of yours is definitely the best thing about you!"

Hearing that, Ryuunosuke brushed the tears from the corner of his eyes as Caster laughed heartily. He sighed deeply as he looked around his surroundings.

"Is this God's punishment for out excessive pursuit of happiness?" he mumbled.

Caster's attitude suddenly changed as he heard Ryuunosuke's words. He firmly gripped Ryuunosuke's shoulders, turning him so they were face to face. A sharp glint flickered in his eyes as he looked at Ryuunosuke's expression.

"I'll only say this once, Ryunosuke. God does not punish humans; he only plays with humans."

Bluebeard's eyes burned with emotion, but his face was blank. He seemed like a different person from the tense figure he was earlier.

"S-sir?"

"Once, I committed the darkest sacrilege, the most vile, most foul thing a man could ever do. Ryuunosuke, the sins you have committed are nothing more than child's play compared to that. But no matter how many I killed, no matter how sinful I became, no divine punishment befell me. Before I noticed, I had been walking the road to Hell for eight years. The harrowing screams and the mournful wails of thousands of children had mingled in the nihilistic darkness! Ultimately, I was not eliminated by God, but by men of endless desires, like myself. The Church and King declared my guilt, captured, and executed me. But all they wanted was my wealth and my land; they simply drew me into a trap to seize that. That was not punishment for my sins! That was nothing more than blatant robbery!"

At that moment, Ryuunosuke realized that he'd struck a nerve in this monster, but he felt no fear. What he felt instead was endless loneliness and anguish. Unlike his prior glibness, the current expression on Caster's face, looking like one who had lost everything important, made Ryuunosuke acutely aware of the sorrow that this great madman concealed in his depths.

"But Sir, even so . . . God still exists, right?"

Listening to Ryuunosuke's soft murmur, Caster could not help but hold his breath, carefully examine the expression of his common yet strangely noble Master.

". . . Why, Ryuunosuke? You have no religion and know nothing of miracles. Why would you think so?"

"Because the world seemed like a boring place. I kept searching, but the more I looked, the more interesting and unusual things I found." Ryuunosuke opened his arms as he spoke, embracing everything in the world. "I've thought about this for a long time. This world is full of so many pleasures. It's far too much luxury for an individual. If we simply change the way we look at things, we will discover endless foreshadowing here. In the search for true happiness, there must be no greater excitement than defeating the world. Somebody must be writing this, the world's script. Someone must be writing this long novel, involving almost five billion characters . . . perhaps, this author is the one we call God."

Caster blinked, staring blankly into emptiness as though contemplating Ryuunosuke's words. After a while, he once again looked at his Master, and asked in a low, solemn voice.

"Ryuunosuke, do you honestly believe that God loves men?"

The serial killer answered cheerfully. "Of course. It is a love from the depths of his heart. A God who is able to keep writing this world's script for tens of thousands of years without stopping must love men very much. Hmm . . . I think God must be doing his best with his writing, as he immerses in the joy of creating His work. He is touched by the love and courage he finds in his work, shedding tears at the sorrowful parts, yet also shocked and terrified by the horror and despair within . . ." Ryuunosuke paused, as though to review what he'd already said, and then he continued. "God enjoys the courage and hope of mankind, but he also likes the sorrow and despair of bloodshed. Without them, the hymn of life would lack vivid expression. Therefore, Sir, this world must be full of God's love."

Like a devoted believer praying before a holy painting, Caster listened to Ryuunosuke's words with quiet solemnity. Then he slowly lifted his head, his expression one of happiness.

"In this modern day, people have lost their faith, and governments have abandoned God's creed. I once thought this was a world near destruction, but I am thoroughly impressed that new followers like you still appear in such times. Oh! Ryuunosuke, my Master!"

"Ah, please, you embarrass me with your words!" Although he did not know why, he at least understood that Caster was complimenting him. Ryuunosuke coyly deflected it.

"However, from your religious perspective, my sins are tiny in comparison."

"It is the nature of first-class entertainers to take on unpleasant chores in return for smiles, right? Sir, God will surely reward your merciless acts by joyfully returning those fools to us."

Hearing what Ryuunosuke said, Bluebeard laughed out loud, seemingly pleased.

"Be it sacrilege or praise! For you, does it all seem to be the worship of God? Ah, Ryuunosuke, your thoughts are truly deep and philosophical! That God, who plays with the world's countless humans, is nothing more than a toy himself—I see! Then even this bad joke has meaning."

Laughing for a while, Caster's eyes once more bore that forlorn look—the look of a man, madly devoted to his art, on the verge of frenzied climax.

"Very well. Then let us, with this despair and vivid tears, dye this divine temple a splendid shade. I will let those in Heaven know that they are not the only ones who understand true entertainment."

"Do you have any brilliant ideas again, Sir?" Ryuunosuke looked expectantly at Bluebeard, who seemed more excited than he had ever been in his life.

"Since it has been decided, let us celebrate. Ryuunosuke, today's feast is going to be a bit special; it will raise the curtains on the new religion you proposed."

"Understood. I'll do all I can to make it as *cool* as possible!"

That night, Ryuunosuke and Caster harvested five children. These children, brought to this unknown, lightless place, huddled together, shivering as they watched the crazed performance unfold before them. Under this new religion christened by these

two crazed worshippers, the souls of these innocent children would not see even a sliver of salvation's light.

– 95:28:46

Glancing outside the window on a whim, Kiritsugu realized it was already dawn. The creeping sun inspired nothing in Emiya Kiritsugu's heart. He resumed his task of compiling information.

He had met Maiya at this hotel in front of the city station three days ago, one of many hidden headquarters for them. The first thing he did was to suspend room service. Following that, he had papered the walls with blank maps of the Fuyuki region, and then annotated various locations on the maps with information pertaining to them. The data had been collected over several days of searching on foot, reconnaissance by familiars, observing the variance of the leylines, tapping the police radio frequencies for information on missing people, and simple surveillance of various locations. These mosaic-like data points, dutifully indicating Fuyuki City's nocturnal happenings on the map regardless of size or importance, showed a state of utter chaos.

Emiya Kiritsugu's right hand continued its work of writing while his left mechanically shoveled his nutrition—hamburgers from a nearby fast food outlet—into his mouth. For nine years, Emiya Kiritsugu had eaten at the table of the Einsberns—a hair removed from royalty. He had grown tired of the cuisine. This fast food, filled with the sense of slaughter, was more suited to his tastes. Being able to eat without interrupting one's words or thoughts was unbeatable. When he had finally finished with his markings on the map, Kiritsugu studied them and re-determined the direction of Heaven's Feel.

Archer—there was no movement at the Tousaka house. Like a hibernating bear, Tokiomi had closed his doors with an unfathomable silence and not left the place since the defeat of Assassin.

Berserker—the silhouette entering the Matou house appeared to be a Master, and the reports from the many familiars sent out suggested that he was completely defenseless and could be attacked at leisure. But Berserker's mysterious special ability could neutralize Archer's potent Noble Phantasm. Perhaps he should be left alone, as a countermeasure against Tousaka?

Lancer—Sola-Ui Nuada-Re Sophia-Ri had begun acting in place of her fiancé, the gravely injured Lord El-Melloi. She was probably the one controlling Lancer now. Was she temporarily taking on the responsibilities of a Master through the Book of the False Attendant, or had she seized the Command Seals and formed a new contract with Lancer? If it was the former, even killing Sola-Ui would not cut off Lancer's prana supply, and it would not make him unable to fight. He would have to decide whether to attack Sola.

Caster—More children had gone missing from the city two nights ago. He did not seem to care about the warrant for his arrest issued by the authorities, and was still continuing his inhuman acts without restraint.

Rider—no clues at all. As he was constantly on the move with his Master in his flying Noble Phantasm, tracking them would be difficult. Appears to be open-hearted and forthright, a formidable enemy without flaws.

Regarding Rider and Archer . . . Maiya had awakened some time back, in the Einsbern Castle, and she had relayed most of the information from Irisviel by telephone. It seemed things had progressed in an unexpected direction; Rider, left without a choice, had to use his Noble Phantasm to wipe out Assassin. Rider's Noble Phantasm, Ionioi Hetairoi, was very much a cause for concern. But what Kiritsugu was more concerned about was Assassin's demise.

Assassin could multiply indefinitely—what did it mean? The troop of Assassins which had attacked Einsbern castle last night must have been their entire combat force; they could not have presented strength in numbers otherwise, being individually weak in combat. It was unlike the farce at the Tousaka mansion; this time, it would be safe to consider Assassin completely eradicated.

What about their Master? Kiritsugu sighed deeply, lighting his first cigarette of the day. He still felt apprehensive about it after all. Kotomine Kirei, the greatest oddity in existence during the fourth Heaven's Feel—Kiritsugu still could not understand why that man had entered the war. When he had spotted Assassin during the chaotic battle at the warehouse street, Kiritsugu had already realized that Assassin's Master was Tousaka Tokiomi's puppet, responsible only for reconnaisance. But thereafter, Kotomine Kirei had done many things that Kiritsugu was unable to understand.

Kotomine Kirei, hiding in ambush at the central building site during the attack on Kayneth at Fuyuki Hyatt . . . Kotomine Kirei, sneaking into Einsbern castle grounds from the other direction

during its siege . . . From any perspective, they only made sense if his target was Emiya Kiritsugu.

Under the ruse of withdrawing from the War, he fled to Fuyuki Church for protection while dispatching large numbers of Assassins as spies. To complete this subterfuge, Kirei should have continued hiding in the Fuyuki Church during this time without setting foot outdoors. But his current actions have exposed him.

Kiritsugu, originally using Irisviel and Saber as cover, had only been exposed during the confrontation with Lord El-Melloi; nobody should have known his true identity until the day before yesterday. Even if Tousaka's intelligence network had discovered Kiritsugu's secret movements, he could not have concluded that Kiritsugu was the one contracted to Saber. That aside, from an overall perspective of the war, what was the point in targeting Kiritsugu?

It could be an illogical personal grudge, but that was unlikely. In his information on Kotomine Kirei's experiences, there were no instances of him crossing paths with Emiya Kiritsugu. There were no friends or relations of Kotomine Kirei among the magi assassinated by Kiritsugu, or even in the people around them who had been sacrificed.

In any case, it was clear that he would continue standing in Kiritsugu's way. His actions constituted more than mere participation in Heaven's Feel; he would not withdraw even after losing his Servant. Kiritsugu exhaled a mouthful of hazy cigarette smoke with an exasperated sigh, still deep in thought. He felt waves of dread whenever thoughts of Kotomine Kirei surfaced, threatening to imprison him in bottomless darkness.

Kiritsugu's tactics were to confuse the opponent's mind thoroughly. If one could see through the opponent's actions—his attack target and objective—one would discover his blind spot and weakness. Furthermore, a magus possesses a greater sense of purpose than ordinary people; for this reason, Kiritsugu had never missed in his hunting. But before him now was Kotomine, an enemy he could not understand on a superficial or intrinsic level. This was his greatest threat. Before this powerful enemy, he was all but helpless. This stalker could read his mind and deduce his actions. Kiritsugu was not the hunter, but the hunted. This was the singular, unforeseen key factor—

"... Who exactly are you?" Kiritsugu murmured, unaware of the movement of his lips. The more he pondered, the further the answer withdrew. He could only grow in frustration. What was the point of this search-and-destroy operation? He would have to prepare himself for a surprise attack at any time.

Kiritsugu had rented a garage in the nearby town, hiding in it a modified oil tanker which could be controlled remotely over long distances. This converted civilian weapon, termed a "low cost cruise missile" by urban guerillas, was originally a trump card prepared for use against a siege by Matou or Tousaka. If it were driven into Fuyuki Church where Kotomine Kirei laid low, even the Executor would not be able to survive ...

"... Stop it, you fool. That's enough." Kiritsugu messily snuffed the cigarette out in the ashtray as he reminded himself. There were still many enemies whose elimination took priority. His goal was Heaven's Feel; Kotomine Kirei was only a defeated

Master. Even if his reason for attacking Kiritsugu was unknown, it was unwise neglect the overall battle through obssession.

Impatience and frustration irritated him; a sign that his judgement was beginning to dull. He needed to rest and start over. It had been over seventy hours since he last slept. Though he did not feel tired under the influence of amphetamines, his fatigue was still accumulating, and his focus and overall condition were both deteriorating. There was still time before his meeting with Maiya today; he should get some rest.

After a trip to the bathroom, Kiritsugu lay down on the bed, and dispersed his consciousness with a self-hypnosis spell. It was a crude way of eliminating mental stress via the disintegration and cleansing of the psyche. Though not a high-level form of thaumaturgy, the dispersion caused a diminution and dislocation of self-consciousness, and few would use it willingly. But it was a most efficient and efficacious form of rest, and Kiritsugu used this method frequently. The scattered consciousness would be restored in about two hours, waking the self-hypnotist. Until then, he would be as conscious as a corpse—but it should be safe to use it in this hideaway.

Kiritsugu, dispelling his enemy from his mind, relaxed and fell into a deep sleep. Under the rising sun, a new day began in the streets outside the window.

– 91:40:34

"You seem to be in a fairly good mood today, Archer."

The glittery golden Servant, acting as one in his own house, sat as he pleased in Kotomine Kirei's private room. For some unknown reason, he had been wearing an unpredictable smile since morning.

A smile is normally infectious, spreading to those around and easing the surrounding atmosphere, but Kirei was not the sort who liked seeing others smiling; moreover, the smile of the King of Heroes could only mean something unsettling.

"I have not seen the Holy Grail—but even if it turns out to be a worthless trinket, that is not my concern. I have found something else of interest."

"Oh? How surprising. Did you not once scoff that this earth bore only forgery and ugliness?"

"That opinion has not changed. On the other hand, I am interested in watching, to the very end, the final outcome of this Heaven's Feel."

Perhaps the miraculous feast at the Einsbern castle's central courtyard last night had caused some change in Archer's mood. Kirei had seen a part of the process, and now sat in recollection—could Rider have been the cause? Or perhaps the question-and-answer with Saber?

"I like arrogant opponents—people unconstrained by their humble strength, striving to ambition. Meeting such opponents raises me to the height of joy." Noticing Kirei's puzzled

expression, Archer leisurely waved the glass of red wine and continued. "But there are two types of haughtiness; one arising from dismal caliber, and the other from lofty goals. The former is not unusual, and very foolish. But the latter is rare and difficult to obtain."

"Both are silly trifles of the same nature, isn't that so?"

"Contrasted with mediocrity, such rare foolishness appears more valuable, does it not? Though born of human nature; it envisions an ideal too great to achieve with human strength, and so it abandons its human status to realize this one ideal. I never tire of such spectacles, and of the sorrow and despair of such people."

Archer raised the glass as though in celebration, and elegantly swallowed the red wine. No matter how bold his image, one could not perceive even a sliver of avarice in this Heroic Spirit. Perhaps this was also his style of being a king.

"So you say, Kirei, but you appear unusually cheerful today."

"Only relieved. My burden has finally been released." The Command Seals that had originally been carved on Kirei's right hand had disappeared. During the battle last night at the Einsbern castle, his Servant had been eradicated. Kirei had completely forfeited his right as a Master. There seemed to be no change, but as he had said, only now had he truly been released from the responsibilities and obligations of being a Master. Kirei's temporary residence at the Church could finally be properly justified.

"Where have the vanished Command Spells gone now? As physical manifestations of magic, they will not just disappear into thin air, will they?"

"In theory, they should have returned to the Grail. Command Seals are bestowed by the Grail. Those who have lost their eligibility as a Master from the loss of their Servant should have their Command Seals reclaimed by the Grail. Yet, if there appears a Servant whose contract had been lifted by the loss of his Master, the Grail would redistribute the reclaimed and unused Command Seals to new contractors."

Twenty-one engraved Command Seals were distributed to seven Masters, each one disappearing after use. The unused Command Seals at the end would then be returned to the supervisor and commissioned for safekeeping.

"In other words, depending on the development of the war, new Masters may possibly emerge?" The King of Heroes should not possess such deep interest in something unrelated to his own desires. Though he found Gilgamesh's question abnormal to some degree, Kirei explained further. "Indeed. But the candidates are not casually chosen by the Grail. During the search for new Masters, the Grail will still prioritize the consideration of those people, possible Masters, who had been previously chosen. In particular, the Masters of the Three Families of the Beginning enjoy special privileges. Even after losing their Servant, if there are other Servants who have not yet formed contracts, they can—if they do not lose their Command Seals—continue to exercise their authority as a Master. It seems that several similar things have happened in the past."

In the eyes of Gilgamesh, who had been silently listening to this explanation, Kirei perceived an unsettling pressure, and could not help but stop.

"What is it? Go on, Kirei."

"Anyway, this is also one of the reasons a Master who has lost his Servant in the war will gain the protection of the Church. When openings appear for other Masters, they stand a great chance of once again obtaining leftover Command Seals. For this reason, the methods employed by participants of Heaven's Feel seek not to incapacitate, but to kill; it ensures no trouble from them in the future.

"Heh." Gilgamesh sneered, seemingly with good cheer, then once again filled the glass with wine. "So to speak, don't you stand a good chance of acquiring Command Seals again, Kirei?"

Hearing these words from the King of Heroes, it was Kirei's turn to sneer.

"Impossible! As my mentor Tokiomi said, my purpose in Heaven's Feel is to support the Tousaka faction, and that purpose has now ended. Assassin's investigation is completed, and Master Tokiomi has already developed a sure-win strategy against all the Masters and their Servants. There is no longer any need for me to appear again."

"I must say, I harbor great suspicion for this plan of Tokiomi's. He does not have the ability to attain the Holy Grail at all."

"You truly speak freely of your own Master." Kirei sniggered, and Gilgamesh directed his crimson red eyes sharply toward him.

"Kirei, it seems that you greatly misunderstand the Master—Servant relationship between Tokiomi and I. Tokiomi treats me in

the manner of a subject to his king, offering prana as tribute. I agreed to obey his summon because of the nature of this contract. Do not liken me to the other Servant lackeys."

"How will you deal with the orders of the Command Seals then?"

"I don't care. If a follower fulfils his obligations, the king will occasionally listen to his counsel. That is all."

Kirei could not help but smile wryly. If Gilgamesh knew the true objective of this Heaven's Feel . . . his contractual relationship with Tokiomi would probably weaken. Of course, at that time, Tokiomi—possessing the Command Seals—would certainly have an overwhelming advantage.

"Right now, the other Masters are in competition for Caster's head. The one who attacks last and deals the decisive blow would be you, Archer. You do not have the time to be tasting my wine leisurely."

"The way Tokiomi dawdles, it will be long before it is time for my entrance. Meanwhile, I can only look for something else to do to pass the time. Kirei, did you say just a moment ago that Assassin had already completed all his assignments?"

"Ahah, the routine business?" Kirei had once promised Gilgamesh to inform him of the various Masters' actions and their motives for seeking the Holy Grail, for his entertainment. To satisfy Gilgamesh's curiosity, Kirei had also ordered Assassin to keep watch. "That investigation has also been completed. I should have let Assassin report it personally last night. The effort of explaining it—"

"No. This is good enough." Gilgamesh sudenly interrupted Kirei. "I have no interest in that shadowy character. Kirei, this information is given meaning only through your mouth."

"……"

Though suspicious of Archer, whose intentions were totally unfathomable, Kirei reluctantly delivered a brief summary of each Master's character. From the intelligence obtained through eavesdropping on the conversations between Masters and their Servants and entourages, their motive for participating in Heaven's Feel could be easily surmised.

Lancer's and Rider's Masters had no particular wish for the Grail, and participated in this war in pursuit of victory only for magi's honor. As for Caster's Master, he did not even know what the Holy Grail was; he only participated in Heaven's Feel in search of even greater thrills from murder.

Berserker's Master seemed to be in search of redemption. In fleeing the Matous, he had caused the second daughter of the Tousakas to become a sacrifice, and was now returning to request the hostage's release in exchange for retrieving the Holy Grail. He seemed to have some history with Tokiomi's wife Aoi. Of the five enemy Masters, his motive was the most basely ordinary. As for Saber's Master—Kirei had to lie to Archer.

Assassin, before his accidental extermination the previous night, had not found any information related to Emiya Kiritsugu. That man seemed to have almost seen through the farce of Assassin's death at Archer's hands, thoroughly concealing his own secrets to the end. Accomplishing this under surveillance as strict as Assassin's was truly a feat worthy of appreciation. In

comparison with the other Masters, he was the only special existence. Even if Kirei had discovered Kiritsugu's true intent, he would probably not have reported it to Archer.

As it looked now, there were still many points of doubt. But this did not shake Kirei's thoughts of crossing swords with Emiya Kiritsugu. This was Kirei's personal problem, unrelated to Heaven's Feel, and he did not have the slightest inclination of allowing outside interference.

Kirei reported this to Archer as the Einsbern family's stubborn wish; that he was participating in this Heaven's Feel only to allow the Holy Grail to descend. Archer, seemingly unable to read Kirei's thoughts, only listened to his reported with the barest of interest.

"—Hm, to let their hopes be dashed is also not bad entertainment." Archer commented disdainfully upon hearing the motives of the other five people. "After all, they're only a herd of rabble. None of them are capable of any creativity whatsoever. To think of seizing my treasure for silly reasons . . . they are thieving pests that should be executed without negotiation."

Hearing Archer's unusually arrogant words, Kirei sighed helplessly. "Of this information that took much work to gather, are these your only thoughts? It seems I have suffered for nothing."

"Suffered for nothing?" A meaningful smile broke out on the King of Heroes' face. "What are you saying, Kirei? These efforts have achieved great results, have they not?"

Sensing the irony in those words, Kirei stared at Archer. "Are you mocking me, King of Heroes?"

"You don't understand? No matter, that is excusable. You are a man who can only see what he cares about." Completely ignoring Kirei's keen gaze, Archer languidly continued. "—Those with no self-awareness can only pursue instinctive pleasure, like beasts chasing the scent of blood. This nature manifests instinctively in their words and actions. Kirei, when you recount all that you have heard, seen, and understood, you have already put your inner thoughts on display. That which your words describe in greatest detail, is also that which you are most interested in. Observing one's words and actions is the best way of understanding one's interests. With these toys called 'humans', and their stories called 'life', there is truly no entertainment more meaningful."

"……"

This time, Kirei had to admit he was truly careless. He had originally thought this to be nothing more than the King of Heroes' meaningless amusement. But his judgment had lapsed; Archer was using this method to probe his innermost thoughts.

"Let us first discount the one you intentionally hid the truth about; subconscious concern is only a sort of stubbornness. What I want to talk about is the person you unintentionally noticed. Of the remaining four Masters, who is it that you paid most attention to?" Kirei suddenly felt strongly uneasy. It would be best to end this topic as soon as possible.

Archer seemed to be satisfied by Kirei's indecision. Smiling as he took another mouthful of red wine, he continued. "Berserker's Master—what was his name again? Kariya? Kirei, your report of him was extremely detailed."

"... His matters were relatively complicated. Naturally, there were more parts that required explanation. That's all."

"Hm, I don't think so. You were more concerned about his matters, so you gave Assassin the order to 'thoroughly investigate these complicated matters'. An order you gave under circumstances even you were not aware of, based solely on interest."

At this irrefutable argument, Kirei began to review his actions. He had indeed believed Matou Kariya to be a character requiring special attention. Not only did he bear strong hatred for Tokiomi, his Servant Berserker also had the mysterious ability of using the Noble Phantasms of others; he was a considerable arch-nemesis for Archer. But they were not the top-most threat.

Master and Mad-enhanced Servant had joined the war hastily prepared. Of the five groups of enemies, they would probably be the first to be eradicated. Merely dragging out the battle into a protracted war would be enough; no scheming would be needed. Left alone, he would meet his demise; he should be an easy opponent to deal with. On re-evaluation, investigating his situation in such detail appeared somewhat insensible.

"... I do admit, this was a lapse in judgment on my part." Kirei nodded with a clergyman's humility, acquired through long years of self-cultivation. "Indeed, on second thought, Matou Kariya is but a short-lived—and thus weak—enemy. He would not be a long-term threat, and is unworthy of attention. I have appraised him too highly, when I only needed to—Archer, you explained too much."

"Heh, is that it?" Though Kirei had made allowances, Archer's glittering scarlet eyes still held an unfathomable expression.

"But Kirei, let us now suppose, in the miraculous event that Berserker and his Master survived until the end, and furthermore obtained the Holy Grail. What would happen then? Have you thought about it?"

If that happens—that is, assuming something completely unreal—Matou Kariya's ultimate goal was a showdown with Tousaka Tokiomi. Putting aside his chances of winning, should he gain victory over Tokiomi and furthermore obtain the Grail, what would Kariya then face? Without further thought, it would only be his own darkness. His goal, originally to help Aoi reclaim her daughter, was now to claim the life of Aoi's husband. He seemed to be unaware of this contradiction—rather, he was intentionally deceiving himself, concealing this feeling from himself, out of jealousy and selfishness. Presented with this bloodstained victory, Matou Kariya, would be put in the dilemma of facing the ugliness of his soul.

Archer, watching Kirei's silent ponderance from the side, smiled. "I say, Kirei. Did you realize the true significance of my question?"

"... What do you mean?" Archer's hint further confused Kirei. Was his train of thought inadequate in any way ...?

"Tell me, Archer. What would be the significance of Matou Kariya's attainment of victory?"

"Nothing, nothing at all—hey, don't put on such a scary expression. I've told you so often that I have no intention of poking fun at you. Think about it—how had Kirei Kotomine

missed the complete meaninglessness of this question? Do you not feel that this matter is worthy of consideration?"

At this rate, Archer would be leading him by the nose, step by step. Kirei gave up on further analysis, resting his entire body against the chair. "You might as well speak plainly, Archer."

"If I had posed the same question to you with another Master as an example, you would definitely perceive at once that this was a completely meaningless question, casting it aside without further thought. But it was not so with Kariya. You did not believe this to be a pointless question, instead immersing yourself in hypothetical questioning. Such ignorance of the futility of one's actions is precisely 'authentic interest'. Congratulations, Kirei! You have finally understood what entertainment is."

"... Entertainment? You speak of pleasure?"

"Yes." Hearing Archer's affirmation, Kirei resolutely shook his head. "Matou Kariya's fate contains no element that would allow him to feel 'pleasure'. The longer his life, the heavier the suffering and lamentation accumulating in his body. To him, an earlier death would be salvation."

"Oh Kirei, why perceive pleasure so narrowly?" Archer sighed deeply at Kirei's incomprehension. "What contradiction is there between suffering, lamentation and pleasure? What we call pleasure does not take any particular form. It is precisely because you do not understand this that you are confused."

"That is unforgivable!" Kirei's angry voice rang out in conditioned reflex. "King of Heroes, only one as evil as you would find happiness in savoring the suffering of others. That is the

spirit of a sinner, an evil which must be punished. Your ways are most incompatible with the path of faith that I walk!"

"So you believe that pleasure itself is a sin? Heh, you do make fallacious arguments. You've become a really interesting man." As Kirei considered a short retort, an acute pain suddenly wracked his entire body, doubling him over.

"——!?"

A burning pain shot from his forearm, near the elbow. Though its cause was unknown, it was a familiar feeling, one which he had experienced before. That same foreign pain; Kirei had felt it three years ago, on the back of his left hand. Everything had started then. The pain gradually subsided, replaced by waves of a burning sensation. His thinking interrupted by surprise, he subconsciously rolled up his sleeve and checked his wrist. On the back of his left hand, the holy marks of fate had suddenly appeared. The remaining Command Seals, missing the portion which had been used once against Assassin, had reappeared in their original form.

"Heh, exactly as I thought. But this is truly too soon."

"Bastard . . ." New Command Seals. The numb sensation from the intense pain proved that these were authentic holy marks, but Kirei was nonetheless temporarily stunned and speechless.

It was impossible. At that point, all the Masters were still alive, and not one Servant had had their contract terminated. Being granted Command Seals again under these conditions was unprecedented. In addition, Kirei was not a member of the Three Families of the Beginning. The Holy Grail granted him, a withdrawn combatant, the same holy marks—what hopes did it

have of him? This was a truly incomprehensible and abnormal situation.

"It seems the Grail still has high expectations of you." Archer spoke with a somewhat sinister smile. "Kotomine Kirei, you should also respond to the Grail's expectations. You must have a reason to wish for the Grail."

"My . . . My reason to obtain the Grail?"

"If it is truly a miracle that can grant any wish, the Grail would definitely be able to realize what you yourself could not perceive —your deepest desires."

Gazing at Archer's expression, Kirei suddenly felt a sense of déjà vu. Yes—that was depicted in the illustrations of the Bible, the expression of the snake of Eden.

"Kirei. Thinking will not bring you the answer. It is precisely this sort of thought, chained by ethics, that has distorted your knowledge. Pray that you can obtain the Grail. At that time, you will find among the things the Grail brings you, the answer to the true happiness you seek."

"……"

This was something Kirei had never thought about, a reversal of the ends and the means. Because he did not know his own wish, he must obtain the all-granting Grail in order to find it. If it were just to find the answer—indeed, there was a way to find an immediate answer.

"… But this way, I will have to personally destroy the wishes of six other people to find the answer. And if I seek the Holy Grail for my own personal intents … I must make an enemy of my teacher and benefactor."

"You must first look for a strong Servant. How else would you contest me?" As if speaking of another's matters, Archer leisurely drank a sip of red wine and said. "Anyway, as a necessary precondition, you must first seize a Servant from the others. As for what comes after ... heh, Kirei, you're on your own." Seemingly more interested in Kirei, who had been granted the holy marks anew, the scarlet eyes of the King of Heroes shone with the light of pleasure. "Pursuing your own desires; that is the true way of entertainment. Only then will entertainment bring pleasure, and pleasure guide you to happiness. The road has been pointed out to you, Kirei, pointed out clearly to you."

– 91:23:15

The essential attributes of a knight which first come to mind are his sword and armor. Not far behind those, and equally vital, is horse-riding. Straddled atop a saddle, holding the reins, galloping on the battlefield at will—that is the expected image of a knight. The steed need not be a horse; other quadruped animals, chariots, and even Imaginary Beasts[1] sufficed as well. Mobility far surpassing travel on foot, and the exhilaration that comes with such freedom, are indeed essential joys common to such riding abilities.

For Saber, who had fought her entire life as the King of Knights, the very act of riding was rooted in the depth of her soul. The Riding ability she possessed as a Servant was perhaps the true reflection of this characteristic of hers.

This is really marvelous, Saber remarked silently as she gently caressed the steering wheel of the Mercedes-Benz 300SL. The feel of this mechanical contraption was completely unlike a stallion, but her first experience with the intricate mechanical contraption brought a discovery that it seemed to be *alive*. The mechanical gears had no blood or soul, but they loyally moved rapidly and sturdily according to the driver's will. This deference the Mercedes displayed was akin to her own beloved stead, and it filled her with trust and satisfaction.

1 Imaginary Beasts Legendary beasts which were alive in the mythical time of gods. One example is Rider's Pegasus in *Fate/Stay Night*. Most Servants would not even be able to combat an Imaginary Beast.

"No wonder Irisviel is so ecstatic about driving." The realization brought a small question which invaded her thoughts—*if driving this car was such a pleasant experience, why did Irisviel pass up the chance to me this time?*

"How does it feel to be driving, Saber?" Irisviel, sitting next to her, asked with a satisfied smile on her face. It was the satisfied expression of a mother watching her child play with a new toy she had bought.

"It is truly an amazing riding being. Had it appeared in my era, it would definitely be something unimaginable." Saber smiled and replied frankly, dispelling her doubt. Irisviel, predicting Saber's reaction beforehand, must have given her this chance. Perhaps it was a reward for her loyalty as a knight. She should also return this gesture as a knight.

"A Servant's ability sure is awesome. Although it is your first time controlling this machine, your skills can truly be regarded as first-rate."

"It feels strange to me too—like I was made to master this skill a long time ago. Rather than understanding through reasoning, the next step of control just comes to me naturally."

Irisviel hummed for a while, then a mischievous smile suddenly emerged on her face.

"I've got an idea. If we buy the latest tank or bomber from the black market, this entire Heaven's Feel could be finished in one blow, couldn't it?"

Although she knew Irisviel was joking, Saber gave an amazed, but bitter smile. "Although your idea is interesting, I can declare this—there are no weapons in any era that can defeat my sword."

An overly confident declaration, but Irisviel did not beg to differ. Anyone who had fought with this Servant would testify to the truth of her words.

"Speaking of that, Maiya is getting deeper and deeper into Fuyuki city—" Saber said in a low voice as she looked at the small truck Hisau Maiya was driving in front of them as a forward scout. "—Is it really all right? Isn't this house, the new headquarters, too close to the center of the battlefield?"

"Not to worry. Both the Tousaka and Matou families openly built their defenses in the city. Other foreign Masters have also resided within in the city without any qualms; it is the Einsbern family, building their dwelling so far away, which appears to be the odd one."

Heaven's Feel demanded that battles to be secret as a matter of principle. As such, the location of the headquarters was not a particularly special consideration. The advantage of terrain applied only to elements of the leylines which affected spirituality-related magecraft.

"Perhaps this new place Kiritsugu chose would be better concealed than the previous castle."

"..."

Saber did not notice it, but her face briefly darkened when Kiritsugu's name was mentioned. Irisviel had already given up on trying to patch their relationship; the strife between the two had been predicted from the start. Though she tried to make up for this strife, if it came to a clean break between Master and Servant, she would have no choice but to act in accordance with her stand.

The strange pair of vehicles—light van and classic sports coupe—finally crossed Fuyuki Bridge and entered Miyama. Leaving Shinto, the scenery changed completely—a gentle, quiet style, simple in form yet bearing historical weight, replaced the flimsy fabrication that was urban Shinto. Despite its plainness, the quiet row of houses bore an aura of long history.

"This is way too close to the Tousaka and Matou headquarters; certainly an unexpected location."

"It's said that the most dangerous place is also the safest. Kiritsugu's choice is well-made, with regards to unpredictability." Though commenting in agreement, Saber voice was stiff. Kiritsugu's theories were appreciable as strategies; what she could not endure was the coldness and cruelty of Kiritsugu's tactics.

Maiya, in the light van slightly ahead, gradually decelerated and parked at the roadside. They had arrived.

"Here? Yet another mysterious building, isn't it?" Stepping out of the Mercedes, Irisviel's first words were full of emotion. In front of her was a Japanese building, as classically elegant as the film set of a period drama. Even in Miyama, where the passage of time seemed imperceivable, this building was considered to be of an extremely rare architecture. Moreover, a building that took up so much land space was rarely seen in the architectural history of modern Japan.

However, the feeling of desolation emanating from this building was also extraordinary. It seemed to have laid unused for a long time. The place must have some history behind it; it had not been torn down despite serving no purpose in civic planning,

and though it had been unoccupied, it bore signs of frequent repair.

"Henceforth, this is your headquarters." Maiya, getting off the small truck, handed Irisviel a string of keys with the matter-of-fact report.

"Ah, just give it to Saber."

"Understood, Irisviel."

Saber took the key ring from Maiya's hand without hesitation. There were many keys on it; apart from the keys for the main door and the porch, it also held keys for the back door and other rooms. Most of them were of normal cylindrical shape, but one was cast in an ancient style.

"Maiya, what's this key for? It is markedly different from the other ones."

"It's the key for the storehouse in the courtyard. Although it looks old, I've verified that the lock works fine." As if realizing the condition of that building, Maiya's cold face clouded just a little. "This house was bought only a few days ago. I'm very sorry, but as you can see, it has not been prepared at all. Perhaps it isn't really suitable for habitation . . ."

"I don't mind. For the time being, as long as it can block out the wind and rain, I won't complain." It was unlike a lady of noble birth to say that, but the Einsbern castle in the wilderness was not any less dilapidated.

"Then I'll take my leave." Maiya quickly returned to the light van as she excused herself—perhaps for yet another duty assigned by Kiritsugu—and departed briskly, leaving Irisviel and Saber standing before the empty house.

"Then let's start checking out this new home, Saber."

"All right."

Opening the door lock, they were greeted with the expected view of a run-down front yard, its maintenance long neglected. Grass grew waist-high in the courtyard, and the main house, overgrown with weeds, aroused feelings of unsettlement.

"Is this is what people call a haunted house?" Like a naughty child sighting a haunted house attraction, Irisviel looked around cheerfully. She hardly seemed to care about the desolate and abandoned house. Seeing her in such childishly high spirits, Saber had no ready emotion to respond with.

"Huh? What's wrong, Saber?"

"Nothing. If you don't mind, then it's fine." Saber, having been through countless battles, was not at all displeased with such dilapidation. If Irisviel could accept these conditions, this would serve adequately as the new headquarters.

"There should be a wooden corridor, tatami, and panelled sliding doors in there. Ohoho, I once said I wanted to see an old Japanese house with my own eyes. Kiritsugu must have done this on purpose."

"..."

How could that cold, cruel, emotionless man, a fighting machine, consider sentimental matters like this on the battlefield? Although Saber did not agree, she said nothing; she would not dampen Irisviel's mood. In this manner, Irisviel checked the inner rooms, sneezing at each clump of dust she encountered. The task finally completed, she wore a serious expression and began to contemplate.

"Is this far from your expectations?"

"Mmm . . . I'm quite satisfied with this, though it's a bit difficult to use as headquarters." Despite Irisviel's weak appearance, she was in fact a first-rate magus. "Although it would be no problem to set up a bounded field around here, when it comes to setting up a workshop . . . but such is the tradition of this country; there's nothing I can do about that. The prana would easily drift away in such an open house, especially with the Einsbern craft . . . Aaah, this is frustrating! I would have liked a room sealed off with stone and earth."

Saber, suddenly remembering something, spoke as she took out the last key they had not used yet. "Didn't Maiya say that there's a storeroom in the courtyard? Shall we check that out?"

"—Aha! This is perfect." Irisviel nodded and spoke with satisfaction as soon as she stepped through the storeroom door. "Though it's cramped, I can practice my craft in here like I did in the castle. As long as a magic circle is established, I can solidify my territory."

This was Kiritsugu's intention from start; a traditional Japanese building like this with an attached storeroom was very hard to find.

"Then let's start preparing now. Saber, could you please get the materials from the car?"

"Right. Shall I get all of them?"

"For now, just take the chemicals and alchemy equipment. Hmm, let me think . . . right, take the red and silver makeup boxes as well."

"As you command." Saber carefully took out a light luggage bag from the Mercedes's trunk. Maiya had packed the luggage, but Saber was not clueless about its contents either.

By the time Saber brought the makeup box, Irisviel had already decided on the location of the magic circle. Pointing to one corner of the storeroom, she instructed Saber. "I'm afraid I'll have to trouble you, Saber. Draw two hexagrams overlapping each other on that spot, with a radius of six inches, facing this direction."

"—Understood." Saber knew a bit of basic magecraft, and easily completed Irisviel's demands. Though she knew the purpose of the instructions, she wasn't clear on Irisviel's intentions.

"Could you mix some mercury for me? Strictly obey the ratios I tell you, and prudently—"

"Irisviel, I've got a question." Unable to bear it anymore, Saber asked the question on her mind since morning. "Is it just me, or are you trying to avoid touching anything at all?"

"..."

"Driving the car, taking the keys ... perhaps such things can be overlooked, but you won't use your hands even for the all-important magic circle. There must be some reason for that. Correct me if I'm wrong, but is there something inconveniencing you today?"

Irisviel glanced around, seemingly finding it difficul to talk about it. Saber kept asking. "If you are feeling unwell, you should tell me beforehand. After all, I'm responsible for your safety, and I need to be prepared for such things."

"... Sorry. But I had hidden nothing from you." Irisviel sighed helplessly, turned towards Saber and stretched out her hand as she spoke. "Saber, I'm going to squeeze your hand as hard as I can, all right?"

"Hmm? Sure." Saber stretched out her hand to hold Irisiviel's. Those fingers, too beautiful and fine for a human, softly took hold of Saber's hand—they shook gently just once, and Saber could not feel any pressure from them.

"... Irisviel?"

"I'm not kidding. That was the hardest I could manage." Irisviel forced a smile. "Just opening my fingers takes all my strength away, and it's impossible to hold or grab anything, not to mention driving a car. Just changing my clothes this morning exhausted me."

"Wh-what on earth is happening? Are you hurt anywhere?" Saber asked in shock, but Irisviel just shrugged her shoulders.

"I just didn't feel well, so I shut off the sensation of touch. Although sealing off one of the sensations suppresses my spirituality to a large degree, it does not influence other activities much. This accommodating convenience is one of the advantages of being a homunculus."

"It's not so simple, is it?! Don't force yourself when you aren't well. You should see a doctor."

"Don't worry, Saber. Did you forget? I'm not an ordinary human. Even if I catch a cold, I can't see a doctor—this kind of discomfort is only a blemish on my constitution. Don't worry yourself too much. I'll adjust it properly later."

Saber did not understand it fully, but she knew further inquiry would unclothe Irisviel's status as a 'manufactured' homunculus and lay it naked to her eyes. Saber stopped herself; she knew very well how proud Irisviel was to be more than merely a manufactured doll.

"I would really have to trouble you, Saber. Trivial duties like the ones today—driving the car and creating the magic circle—will require your help, my lord knight."

"These are things I should be doing. It was I who asked questions that should not have been asked. I am deeply sorry."

"All right, all right. Let's hurry and finish the magic circle. As long as I can rest properly in a magic circle connected to the leylines, my situation would improve."

"As you command. Please repeat the steps of the construction."

The duo began to create the temporary workshop in the storeroom. Saber concentrated on the creation of the magic circle of the Einsbern craft, refining the mercury according to Irisviel's instructions. Like two harmonious sisters, they busied themselves in the storeroom, surrounded by a happy atmosphere. But Saber would never have imagined that this happy period she spent with Irisviel in this storeroom would be the last beautiful memories she would have of this noble princess.

– 90:56:26

From the distant west, an army arrived, rolling dust sweeping in its wake. No one had dared to underestimate this invading army since the beginning. Rumors about its might had already swept through the entire country like a gale long before this army arrived. Usurping the throne of the small country Macedonia in the far west country of Greece, the young king had since then subdued the neighboring countries in the blink of an eye, and became the leader of Corinth.

Alexander—His ambition was said to have crossed the Straits, and he had wanted to extend his insolent neck into this great empire of Persia. Of course, none of the brave warriors who swore utter loyalty to protect their glorious country would bow his head before the invader. The warriors bet their augustness and honor as soldiers upon this and countered the attack of Alexander's army. However, the soaring morale of the enemy that appeared before them terrified them, and they shivered in fright.

It was not a command of gods, or the call of the greater good; all was only to fulfil a tyrant's desire for conquest. However—why did these soldiers carry such soaring morale, such mighty fighting spirit? Even warriors who swore to protect their country till death could not contend with them.

However, it was not this that truly shocked the defeated generals. Young Alexander, standing in front of the captives,

opened his mouth and spoke like a prankster kid—*what I want is not your country. I want to keep heading toward the East.*

Was their country merely a foothold for his ongoing conquest? No, of course not. Did his ambitions extended beyond the Iranian plains, to distant India? No, it was the East beyond even that. Seeing that none of his foreign subjects could guess his intentions, the King said loudly.

"My goal is the end of the world. My destination is the furthest border of the East. I want to behold Oceanus[2] with my own two eyes. I want leave my footprints on the beach lapped by that endless sea."

Of course, none believed his words, and thought them a boast to conceal his true intentions. But this man really did return control of his conquered lands to the local nobles, bringing his army away with him onward to the East. The defeated generals finally understood when they watched his back disappearing into the distance, themselves dumbstruck.

None of those reasons the tyrant gave were lies. He was only heading toward the East, sweeping away all who stood in his way. How pitiful and deplorable were those soldiers who discarded all their glory and riches and left their homelands to follow him! Pondering the deplorability of their fate, they were initially indignant at fighting for such a foolish reason. But they, who had lost everything, suddenly thought—

2 Oceanus God of the ocean in Greek mythology, residing in the ocean surrounding the land of the world, which demarcates the absolute end of the world.

What would they see behind that mountain? What would they see at the other side of the sky? To explore the unknown world—was that not the dream all men possessed in their youth?

As they aged, cementing their positions and climbing the social ladder, they discarded their youthful dreams for those illusory glories and titles. Now, this man shattered their *raison d'être* in one night—and once again ignited the dream in their hearts.

The men who understood this took up arms once again. They were neither heroes nor generals, just ordinary youths uncovering the armor and weapons deep inside their storerooms. Their hearts, whence pride and willpower had abandoned, started their throbbing then, and they followed the back of the great king traveling to the east.

Thus, the army of the King grew endlessly with each victory on his road. How incredible were those beheld in the eyes of others! Heroes who were once defeated, generals of vanquished armies, and dethroned kings; all walked together, shoulder by shoulder, with the same smile on their faces and the same light sparkling in their eyes.

Toward Oceanus! The men called loudly together. *Forward, to the East, to the far East!* And onward until they beheld the legendary beach with that historic man.

The long march continued without end. They crossed boiling deserts, scaled chilly snow-capped mountains, forded billowing rivers, chased away ferocious beasts, fought for their lives against alien tribes never seen before, and against against unknown weapons and strategies.

Innumerable soldiers had died in foreign lands; their sight faded as they stared at the back of the King, marching ever forward. Their hearing faded while they listened for the sounds of the tide from the distant East. Even as they died in battle giving their all, their faces held a proud smile to the end. Very soon, they would return to the image in their dreams, the evening-mist-covered seashore they had once seen.

There, no sounds existed but the ceaseless lapping of waves against the shore; a sea so distant and wide, one could not see its end. That was the scene their King described to them, but they never beheld it even once in their lives. This was not a scene from their memories, but one they continued to long for in their hearts during their heroic crusading lives.

The youth seemed to hear a billowing of the tide when the dream of the Heroic Spirit's memories, transmitted from a distant time and space, ended. That billowing had, perhaps, always echoed in his heart.

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Rider agreed without question when Waver mentioned that they should take a stroll in the streets. Of course, nothing interested Waver much in this little eastern town compared to his hometown London; he just wanted to find a book. The easiest way to do that would be to use the library, but that would be somewhat inconvenient with a giant like Rider following him. Moreover, it was sheer foolishness to bring a loud guy like Rider into the library. Besides, Rider's first encounter with the library had ended

in its damage; it would be problematic if Rider tagged along, was recognized, and Waver had to pay for the damages. So he chose to search in bookshops—he had to go to larger shops to find English books, as local bookshops only sold books written in the native language.

A market that was too busy would also be problematic. It was the first time Waver had walked in the streets of Fuyuki Shinto in the daytime; he had not had any particular need to come out during the day before then. The morning streets were void of the demonic aura which filled the night, and the warm sunlight and fresh air lifted his mood.

"Say, what on earth got into you this time?"

"Nothing in particular; just felt like being cheerful for once." Waver replied, annoyed, to Rider's qeustioning jest. Nothing irritated him in particular, nor was he unsatisfied with Rider's work; pointless things like cheer had nothing in common with his own strategies. In any case, he wanted to completely forget about the War of the Holy Grail even if for only a little while. That was the truth.

The meaning of joining this War of the Holy Grail had changed a little in Waver's heart. While these changes were small, they completely took over all processes of his brain, depressing and suffocating him.

"All right, all right, just stop asking why. Weren't you yelling since the day before yesterday that you want to stroll in a busy place?"

"Mmm, the pleasure of the bustling atmosphere in a foreign market easily matches the pleasure of battle."

"... Countries brought into war and strife for such reasons are pitiful indeed." Waver mumbled helplessly. Hearing his words, Rider tilted his head in surprise and asked. "What's wrong, kid? You speak like one who has seen it with his own eyes."

"Fine, just pretend that I had not said anything."

A rare number of Masters who had established contracts with Servants could experience the former memories of the Heroic Spirit in the form of dreams. Waver was reluctant to mention what he had dreamed of this morning, although he didn't know if Rider was aware of it. No one should want others to witness events in their memory; moreover, Waver had not intended to see those memories in the first place.

As soon as they arrived at the bookshop in the shopping street in front of the station, Rider expressed immense interest in the shops around them. Waver would not need to worry about the King of Conquerors stirring up trouble before his proper business was done.

"I'll take care of some business here."

"Mmm."

"Do whatever you like, but do not *ever* step out of this shopping street. We can't be careless even during the day. You need to be able to rush to me immediately if I am attacked."

"Mmm! Mmm!"

He didn't even know if Rider was listening at all. Rider's big eyes were glinting at the surrounding restaurants, toy shops, gaming arcades and food stalls already. "... Don't conquer, don't invade."

"Huh?!"

"What?! Seriously . . ."

Worried that they might draw attention if they dallied too long here, Waver stuffed his wallet into the King of Conquerors' thick palm. "Don't steal anything, and don't you think about eating without paying! Use that money to buy something if you want it! Do you need me to drive it into you with a Command Seal?"

"Hahahaha! Don't be so nervous. Macedonian decorum is applicable to all civilized men in any country." With that indifferent remark, Rider disappeared excitedly into the crowd of packed and raucous shoppers. There was no way to know if he really understood what Waver meant. He could only sigh as he looked at Rider's figure gradually disappearing into the crowd. Though he was still slightly worried, Rider adapted very well to foreign cultures despite his careless demeanor. The soft methods he used against the MacKenzie couple last night was the best testimony.

However, if Rider spent all the money in the wallet Waver just gave to him, half the funds he prepared for the Fuyuki Holy Grail War would be gone. But compared to Rider triggering some unsolvable problem, it would be cheaper to avoid that with his expenditure. As long as he could get the Holy Grail, it would not matter if he did not have the return fare. Some maturing on Waver's part had led to this progress from his originally stingy personality to his current indifference towards money.

Waver did not plan to buy the book if he really found it. It would be enough to read it in the bookshop. Rider would ask him about the book, and he did not want to take that risk.

Perhaps because of the number of foreign residents here, the foreign language shelves not only contained tourism booklets and vulgar paperbacks, but also a large variety of other books. Waver found the book he was looking for much faster than he expected, and was soon immersed in it.

He had been this way since childhood. He was confidently unbeaten when it comes to understanding a book in a single read-through. In Clock Tower, this talent of his, like some kind of librarian's ability, made researching books much easier. Whenver he found a book full of unnecessary verbiage and incomprehensible jargon, he always thought with hateful indignation about how he would have written it in simpler and more straightforward fashion.

The unpleasant memories were quickly chased out of his consciousness as he flipped through the pages. The contents of the book were very captivating, pulling the reader's thoughts along to the distant end of the world. Waver remained in this oblivious state for a period of time beyond his reckoning, when he suddenly felt heavy steps, different from an ordinary person's, enter into hearing range. He immediately put the book back and feigned a calm demeanor. As he turned, his sight connected with Rider's, who happened to be looking at the foreign language shelves as well.

"Oooh! I found you, I found you! It really is hard spotting a short dude hiding between the shelves. What a bother to find."

"Normal folks are shorter than book shelves, you idiotic giant! Now, what did you buy this time?"

A paper bag, so large it made Waver feel uncomfortable, was held up in one of Rider's hands. He eagerly opened it and showed it to Waver.

"Look! So 'Admiral's Grand Strategies IV' goes on sale today, and I bought the limited edition release! Wahahahaha, my luck rank is working well indeed!"

The mindlessness of Rider's purchase exceeded Waver's imagination by at least an order of magnitude; he felt a wave of dizziness in the form of a headache.

"Say, you only bought the software for such a big thing . . ." Half way through his sentence, Waver suddenly realized that the paper bag in Rider's hand was too large for a mere software disc, and guessed at the gaming console in the paper bag as well.

"All right, kid! Let's hurry back and play together. I even bought an extra controller!"

"Let me tell you this: I have no interest whatsoever in such vulgar games."

At Waver's remark, Rider immediately furrowed his brows in irritation, and said with a heavy sigh.

"Huh, honestly, why do you like to immerse yourself in that little world of yours? . . . Won't you just let yourself enjoy things a bit?"

"Stop bothering me! How would a magus like me, one who searches for the truth, have the spare time for these pointless things? I don't have extra brain cells to waste on computer games!"

"Hmm? Then you have extra brain cells to waste on this book?"

As Rider spoke, he pulled out the book that Waver had hastily stuffed back into the bookshelf. Caught completely by surprise, Waver uncontrollably rebuked him nervously. " O-o-of course not! What makes you think I was reading at this one before?"

"It's the only book put back the wrong way round; only an idiot would miss it—Huh? 'Alexander the Great' ... isn't this my biography?"

Waver wished a chasm would open up in the ground and swallow him. This feeling of shame was even worse than having his tutor Kayneth mock his essay.

"You really are a weird guy. Isn't the man himself, standing before you, more reliable than these unverified records? Isn't it easier to just ask me whatever questions you have?"

Waver yelled, half crying, and grabbed the book from Rider's hands. "Aaaaaa, fine! I'll ask you, I'll ask you!" With that remark, he flipped to a page that he was particularly interested in.

"Historical records say you were a very short man. Why do you look like an idiotic giant?"

"I'm short? Where did you read that!?"

"Look at this! It is said that your feet could not even reach the footstool when you conquered the Persian Empire and sat on Darius' throne, and they had no choice but to swap that footstool for a table!"

At Waver's mention of the name, the King of Conquerors laughed loudly and clapped his hands, saying as he gazed nostalgically at the sky. "Aaa, Darius? That could not be helped; I'm short indeed compared to that giant. Not only did he possess

majestic caliber as emperor, his physical figure was just as grand. He was indeed a ruler fitting for the mighty Persian Empire."

From Rider's description, the other man should have been a giant more than three meters tall. At the thought, Waver's brain could not help but feel a chill.

"Unimaginable . . . it really is unimaginable!"

"Along that line of thought, King Arthur was actually a woman! A woman! Isn't that more surprising compared to my height? Anyway, this so-called history, written by whomever, wherever, faces great difficulty in describing the situation completely and accurately." Rider laughed optimistically, like one who cared nothing of the discriminating records left in history. Waver, staring at his expression, went on. "You just let others write whatever they want? This is history that concerns you!"

"Hmm? This isn't much to be worried about. Do you find it weird?"

"Of course! Any ruler in any era would wish to have his name remembered by those after him. They would definitely get angry if they know that the records of them, made by men in the future, were in error or incomplete in coverage."

"Hmm, that is true. If you can leave your name in history, it would count as some kind of immortality. However, these are meaningless to me. I'd rather have twenty more years of life than exist in name only for two thousand years."

He could not tell if Rider's words, delivered with a bitter smile, were his true thoughts or only a joke—for Waver, who had just finished reading the history of the King of Conquerors, this was a heavy topic he did not know how to answer. Alexander the Great,

who created the largest empire in history to date, refused to lose himself in the glory of this great accomplishment, yet kept marching forward. The curtains fell on his life after a short period of only thirty years. No matter how later men lamented the tragedy of his passing at the height of his life, the emotions he himself expressed about his short life were heavy to others, no matter how light the tone he used.

"Aaa, if I had just ten more years, I would have been able to conquer the West as well."

Standing behind the King of Conquerors, who excitedly wondered about possibilities, Waver finally could not control himself and interjected. "... Then, after you get the Holy Grail, how about wishing immortality to it?"

"Immortality? That's a good idea. If I won't ever die, I'd be able to conquer the entire universe." Rider seemed to suddenly remember something as he said this, and his face darkened.

"Speaking of immortality, there was another idiot who gave up the immortality he once found. Ha! That bastard really manages to stay on my mind."

Waver had no idea what Rider was talking about, and it was also the first time that Rider spoke to himself in this matter. Right now, Waver had a new understanding to the meaning of Rider's wish that he spoke of in the quiz of the Holy Grail last night.

In the afternoon, Waver was silent throughout their journey home. Everything on the streets would soon be enveloped with darkness, and the nocturnal Fuyuki City would once again become

the battleground of Heaven's Feel. As a Master, Waver would also have no choice but to face this cruel war with his Servant.

He felt no terror or restlessness. His Servant was the most powerful one; that was beyond doubt—he had witnessed the might of Rider's true Noble Phantasm with his own eyes last night. Even now, he still felt like he was right there, his nostrils assaulted by the scent of the hot wind which blew the boiling sand dunes along. An army of cavalry in high morale was before his eyes, behind the majestic and proud face of the king who drew himself to his full height in front of that formation. Ionioi Hetairoi—a Heroic Spirit with such a mighty Noble Phantasm had no reason to lose. Alexander would definitely defeat all other enemies and obtain the final victory.

That would be called a victory for the King of Conquerors, Alexander—but what about the victory of Waver Velvet? He had never forgotten, and would never forget. He was once mocked and looked down upon by those so-called prestigious families and nobility. He gambled all he had to join the War of the Holy Grail as a counter blow to their contempt towards him. Obtain the victory of the War of the Holy Grail and become the best magus in the world; that was the goal Waver set himself.

But the War of the Holy Grail that unfolded at Fuyuki completely surpassed Waver's anticipations . . . the Servant he summoned was one who completely ignored his Master's commands and acted by himself, fighting only with his mighty strength. At this rate, Rider would definitely walk step by step toward victory with ease. Meanwhile, was he only to hide behind his Servant fearfully, being of no help even at the last minute,

muddling through to the end of the War? Was he to obtain the Holy Grail through sheer luck of the draw? What would be proven with such an achievement? That he obtained glory, sheltered under Rider's shadow? At the end, this would only make others continue their mockery. And if Rider really lost, then . . . what could a Master as useless as he do?

He would not experience any growth as a mage at this rate. It would only display his incapacity, insignificance and humiliation, especially in direct contrast with an overly powerful Heroic Spirit. This made Waver more ashamed at the humiliation he went through at Clock Tower.

"Why're you so quiet? Hmm?"

A sound came from somewhere above Waver's head. Looking up, he saw that Rider still wore the usual incredible, innocent smile, and was looking down at Waver.

I have had enough of looking up like this. I do not want this experience of being looked down at again. I have absolutely had enough of you! Although he almost spurted this impulsive sentence out, Waver barely held back this outburst with the last bit of composure he could muster, and replied euphemistically.

"Nothing, just feeling a little bored with you."

"See, you felt bored after all, right? That's why I suggested we play this game together—"

"It's not that!" As usual, his reply had nothing to do with the question, and Waver finally reached the limits of his patience. "Having a Servant so powerful that the Holy Grail is almost guaranteed doesn't give me anything to be proud of! Making a

contract with a Servant such as Assassin would have shown my worth even more!"

Hearing Waver's words, Rider scratched his head with a snort. "If you really were to do something so stupid, you'd probably have died many times over by now."

"That's enough from you! I have no qualms about dying in my own battle! I wouldn't be here participating in the War of the Holy Grail if I was afraid of dying! And—how do I say this—when did you become the protagonist!? Always acting by yourself before I gave the order; what kind of a position are you putting me into with your antics? What did I come all the way to Japan for?!"

"Calm down, calm down . . ." Unlike Waver, tensed like one in a face-off between two combatants, Rider still smiled without any seriousness. It was as if Waver was hammering a nail into a bag of rice; he could not use any force.

"If the wish you want to fulfill after obtaining the Grail is able to move my mighty desires, then the King of Conquerors would be completely at your command from now on—how about that? Do you wish to grow a bit taller?"

"Of course not! . . . Haaa!"

Seeing that Waver's mood became more agitated the more he talked, Alexander placed a hand on his head, and interrupted him as if saying 'isn't this good enough?'. "Say, kid, there's no need to be so eager, right? This War of the Holy Grail wouldn't count as the climax of your life, would it?"

"What—?!"

Isn't this ritual the miracle of a lifetime? Waver, who was about to open his mouth and rebuke, suddenly understood

Alexander's meaning. For this King of Conquerors, the Holy Grail was only a means to bring him into the world again. His true goal was the conquest of the entire world, from span to span, after the War of the Holy Grail.

"If you really wish to pursue a life full of glory and dreams, go and fight for yourself. It wouldn't be too late to find a battlefield made for you after all that."

"..."

Before this miracle, hailed as being able to grant all wishes, this guy's wish was nerely to have a human body—how foolish did that sound? However, there was nothing wrong with this wish for one who thought one's own value greater than the Holy Grail. Just what kind of a person is this guy, so arrogant and confident about his might? It was with such questions that Waver purposefully looked up his historical records. However, the more he read about the glorious accomplishments written in history, the more profoundly he felt—

This man merely possessed a charisma overwhelming and incomparable with other mortals. So great was it that even majestic, elite armies worshiped him, believed him like a god, and even gave up their lives for him. In the end, Waver had to admit —those who mocked the King of Conquerors's wish as a boring wish were the foolish ones who merely dragged their lives along day to day, spending their life away on nothing.

"I shouldn't be the only one unsatisfied by this contract, right?" Waver asked in a low voice after silently swallowing his humiliation.

"Hmm?"

"You must have some complaints too, correct? Why did one as useless as I end up being your Master? You could obtain victory even more easily had you been partnered with an outstanding Master."

Without showing any sign of comprehension, Rider said evenly, "Mmm, you're right." He lifted his head and looked toward the sky. "It's true that your figure would look more fitting than it is now if it were more imposing."

The King of Conquerors's half-mocking reply ignited all the anger in Waver's heart in an instant. As the short Master became even angrier and almost erupted, Rider suddenly took out the world map that never left his side and spoke, pointing at the first page.

"Ok kid, look here, at the enemy in front of us."

"..."

The map of the entire world was printed in A2 size. Rider's so-called enemy was this entire world.

"Come. Try to draw, in scale, our current appearance beside our enemy. Line us up and compare us."

Waver signed helplessly towards Rider's pointless question.

"How can I draw that—?"

"You can't draw it, right? You wouldn't be able to draw it no matter how fine your pen is. Even drawing with a needle tip would be too wide—we two are the same compared to the enemy before us, just two very tiny dots. Who even cares how fitting our actions are?" The tall Servant laughed without restraint.

"This body is just one grain of sand in a desert compared to what I should conquer. You and I, we're the same, both so tiny, so

small we can't be seen; what's the point of us comparing the sizes of our figures?"

"..."

"I feel even more elated precisely because of this." Rider laughed openly, and continued to speak boldly.

"The more insignificant I feel, the more I want to rule the world with this insignificant body of mine. That is indeed the most exhilarating feeling ... Listen, that is truly the heartbeat of the King of the Conquerors!"

Waver was completely defeated by Rider's vigor. Before Rider's optimistic mind, the irritation and anxiety in Waver's heart were only unworthy hassles. The King of Conquerors' eyes beheld no such daily anxieties.

"You're saying that no matter what kind of Master you get, no matter how weak and small I am, it would be no problem for you at all, right?"

"Why would you think that? Oi!" Rider furrowed his brows, forced out a laugh, and patted Waver's back. "Kid, this inferiority you feel is indeed forerunner to a king's spirit. You would still think yourself insignificant no matter how I explain to you. However, you'd still persist in marching toward a higher goal despite knowing this. Aaa, from my experience, the seed of supremacy has already taken root in your heart."

"...You're not praising me at all, but treating me as a fool."

"However, kid, you're so foolish that it's cute." Rider smiled and spoke frankly. "If I really made a contract with a Master whose ambitions are not too far from mine, like you said, then I would definitely feel really bored. However, your wishes far

surpass your capacities. Someone like you, who would chase a far-distant glory, is the basic archetype of one living in my time. For this reason, I am glad I made a contract with a foolish kid like you."

"..." Waver turned his face aside, not daring to face Rider's rustic smile. *Why does this idiotic giant always comfort me with such unpleasant words? No one would be happy to be called a fool.* Not knowing how he should respond, Waver almost wanted to disappear right now—

Right at that moment, an unanticipated, evil chill suddenly passed through Waver's entire body. The Magic Circuits in his body spasmed and began to hurt terribly, and he grimaced. An abnormal chaos had appeared in the prana of the surrounding air. His Magic Circuits, calibrated to it, fell into an abnormal state with it.

Standing beside him, Rider also looked solemnly to the East, in the direction of the abnormal prana, with the sharp instincts of a Servant.

"... The riverside." Rider said in a low voice, like a soldier about to walk into the battlefield. Hearing this, Waver also immediately realized that the night's battle had already begun; the War of the Holy Grail was still ongoing. Without time to attend to the sentiments still trapped in their hearts, the soldiers once again threw themselves into battle.

Act 10

– 84:34:58

Waver and Rider were not the only ones who perceived the presence of the strange sorcery. The spell-like waves emitted from Mion River were similar to the multiple auras of the ritual magecraft class; such a phenomenon could not be created without at least ten participating mages. Certainly, every magus in Fuyuki city—namely, the masters participating in the Holy Grail War—would have sensed that at once.

At that moment, Sola-Ui Nuada-Re Sophia-Ri, with her newly acquired rights as Master, was with Lancer at the rooftop of Fuyuki Centre, still under construction. From that height they had an overlooking view. Tonight, a unseemly amount of mist seethed from the Mion River, obscuring their field of vision drastically. One with mortal eyesight could only make out the blurred shape of the illuminated Fuyuki bridge.

"Can you see what's going on, Lancer?"

At Sola's question, Lancer, looking through the mist with his super eyesight, nodded. "It really is Caster. Looks like something

has set up camp in the middle of the river. I'm afraid I can't see it quite clearly enough to make out detail though."

It completely lacked any notion of concealment; its vulnerability was unbecoming of a magus. Was Caster, targeted by the others under the supervisor's arrangement, still unaware?

"If we are to bring him down, this would be the best chance, right?"

"Yes. Whatever he is doing, it would be wise to kill him before he achieves his aim."

That was not all. Looking down at the back of her hand, on which were engraved the Command Seals plundered from her fiance, Kayneth El-Melloi, she thought: *I'm sure other Masters would have sensed Caster's appearance. If I'm aiming for the reward from the supervisor—the supplementary Command Seals—I have to overtake the other rivals and defeat Caster immediately.*

If they managed to seize Caster's head successfully, these Command Seals—one short due to Kayneth's idiocy—would be complete again. Three Command Seals, as they originally were—her flawless bond with Heroic Spirit Diarmuid would be regained. with such thoughts in mind, Sola could not suppress her violently throbbing heart.

"I will go out and attack. Master Sola, please stay here and observe my fighting."

"No! I am now a Master. I will back you up from nearby."

At those pleading eyes, Lancer shook his head determinedly. "That cannot be done. With all due respect, my lady does not possess the battle knowledge that Lord Kayneth does. That

riverbank will become a field of death. Even for one such as I, a battle to protect my lady, whose defences fall short; is almost impossible. Kindly understand my situation."

"But ..." Despite Lancer's explanation, merely parting from Lancer's side for even a short while was, to Sola at the present moment, a hardship beyond forlornness.

"Sola-sama, do you suspect dullness in my spear point? Do you think I am fooling around in this selfish fight?"

At Lancer's narrowed eyes and harsh question, Sola shook her head hastily. Adding to the humiliation Kayneth had heaped on Lancer was out of the question. By all means, Sola had to make Lancer, who still swore allegiance to Kayneth, understand that Sola was the one truly worthy of his loyalty.

"Lancer, I will leave the battlefield to you. Please fight this battle freely without any regret."

"I am indebted to you." Lowering his head quietly, Lancer kicked hard at his steel-framed foothold and leapt toward the street lights beneath his eyes.

Watching the Servant leaping from roof to roof, earnestly focused on the river, Sola saw him off with bitter, painful feelings. Ever since she had substituted Kayneth as his Master, that Heroic Spirit had not smiled at her even once.

The distance from the headquarters to the Mion River, the source of the abnormal magecraft, was just a few minutes of travel in the Mercedes which Saber was driving. The streets of Miyama town were narrow and complicated, and under normal circumstances the time required would exceed thirty minutes. Nevertheless, her

Riding skill overturned such assumptions. The silver automobile rushed through the narrow lanes and curves so quickly, with many bumps and close-shaves, that one might almost doubt the laws of nature.

Springing off the road onto the riverside path, the automobile landed with an elegant spin turn and stopped. Too impatient to even open the roadster's wing door, Saber leaped out and sprinted up the bank. The fog was thick enough to block mortal vision, but not that of Servants. Sure enough, her bitter enemy was right in front of her, calmly still in the middle of the 200M-wide river. At the top of the bank, exiting from the passenger seat, Irisviel ascertained the figure in the mist with her magecraft-strengthened eyesight, and frowned with an irritated expression.

"Just as I thought. It's Caster."

Saber nodded, and observed the enemy Servant painstakingly. Alone and unaccompanied by his Master, he was right in the center if the river, seemingly on the water surface—there was no sandbar. On closer inspection, his foothold was made up of grotesque shadows gathering beneath the water surface. The swarm of creatures she had battled in the forest the other day were gathering under Caster's feet. From the abnormal emission of prana, there was no doubt that Caster was performing some sort of large-scale magecraft. The outset of this strange fog centered about the river was probably an aftermath of this as well. With nary a sign of intense focus, he merely stood, relaxed. The vortex of raging prana overflowed from the grimoire in his hands, distorting even the space around it. It was an extraordinary prana

kiln, a Noble Phantasm compiling monologic procedures; in the hands of a lunatic, there was no weapon as dangerous.

"Welcome, Holy Maiden. It is most delightful to meet you again." Caster bowed in customary fashion, and Saber's eyes flared with anger.

"You're incorrigible! What's your plan tonight, heretic?"

"I'm very sorry, Jeanne. The guest of honor this evening is not you, my lady." His face twisted into a sinister, chilling laugh, revealing a madness unseen before, and he responded. "In spite of that, to be honored by my lady's presence again brings me much joy. Please enjoy to the fullest this banquet of death and degeneration which your unworthy Gilles de Rais has prepared."

Under his feet, the dark surface began to shake. The countless creatures gathered under the summoner's feet extended their innumerable tentacles simultaneously—were they swallowing Caster, who was standing on their heads, or receiving them? At first glance, he seemed to be assaulted by his own treacherous familiars. However, with his entire body covered by the tentacles, Caster proudly raised the voice of his mad, ringing laughter a tone; it was now a horrendous shriek.

"Now, we will wave the flag of salvation once again! It is good that the abandoned have gathered, and great that the condemned have gathered as well. I am the leader! I am the commander! Resentment towards us, the oppressed ones, must surely have reached even God! Lord of the heavens, I welcome this condemnation and offer up my body!" The bubbling surface swelled up, raising Caster, who was still being swallowed by the tentacles. The number of the creatures forming his foothold

rapidly increased. Considering the depth of the river, the thought became much more terrifying.

"Caster is . . . being absorbed??"

Before Saber's horrified eyes, the numbers crowding at the summoner's body continued to swell. The summons of Prelati's Spellbook were seemingly inexhaustible. The countless tentacles entwined with each other and fused, becoming a lump of meat. The glittering, filthy, nauseating mucus was a sandbar of meat; a meat island. Yet, their numbers continued swelling. Even Caster's figure had disappeared; only his voice reverberated like a cry of victory.

"O you proud God! O you cruel God! We'll drag you down from your heavenly seat! O Beloved Lamb of God! O humans who take after the image of God! At this very moment, scorn, insult, and rip apart, to your heart's content! We will ride on the guffaws of the rebels, to the lamentations and shrieks of God's children, and strike the gates of heaven!"

The dirty lump of meat had already swelled to the size of a sphere. Perhaps this is the real form of the diabolic underworld. All the familiars Caster had employed prior to this were but bits and pieces of it; mere cannon fodder.

"That is . . ."

A grotesque shadow rose, with darkness as its background—at that disgusting, yet overwhelming majesty, Saber held her breath. Even the champions of the deep seas—whales and giant squids—were not this huge. It was a nightmare governing the ocean in a realm outside of this world. "Sea demon" was a fitting name for the aquatic giant.

It was fortunate that no one was standing with Irisviel at the river bank, but at the other shore of the river, residences were already lighting up. Though it was late at night, the sounds of madness would be carried there by the wind. Naturally, such an obvious mystery would be exposed to the eyes of the public. At least the thick, shrouding night fog would obscure the monster to all but a few. The residents' panic would be confined to a restricted area. In any case, the unspoken agreement that the Holy Grail war should be conducted in secret had been completely violated.

"I have underestimated this fellow … to think he would summon such a monster!"

"No; however strong a Servant is, the form of the familiar they can summon and use is limited. However, that is only true for familiars the are *using* …" This time, there was awe even in the voice of stout-hearted Irisviel. "Neglecting control of the familiars after the summoning, if this is but a mere "invitation" … no matter how powerful the monsters are, it would logically be possible—so long as he had the prana and technique to keep the door open."

"… That monster is not under Caster's control?"

"No doubt about it."

Irisviel's shaken state was probably due to the terror she was able to comprehend as a magus. Nevertheless, Saber had no difficulty grasping the gravity of the situation.

"Magecraft can be said to be the art of browsing the catalog of evil. But *this* is a genuine evil beyond the reasoning of those minions. Summoning *that* thing—an incarnation of bottomless

craving, of infinite greed, of a desire for endless devouring—summoning such a thing is no art, nor anything of the sort!"

Tightening her fists in anger, Saber considered the magus's madness. "Well then, that creature is not challenging anyone to a fight . . .?"

"That's right. It was just invited to eat. A city like this would only take a few hours to be completely consumed."

"—Tcth!"

Caster had no recognition of battle or victory. The demented Servant only sought to wreck the conduct of the Holy Grail War itself, sending it back without fulfilling its purpose, together with all the lives in this city.

A familiar peals of thunder sounded, and Saber turned around. The shining Chariot of God's Authority had just landed in the open space of the park, currently populated only by the two of them. Holding the bridles, the gigantic Servant shot an insolent smile.

"Yo, King of Knights. What a fine night . . . is what I wanted to say, but this is not the time for genteel greetings."

"The King of Conquerors, incorrigible as ever. Did you come again to make some jokes?"

Evading the sharp tongue of Saber who was now on guard, Rider calmly raised his hands. "C'mon, c'mon. Tonight's the only truce we have. I can't kill anything in peace if that huge fella is left alone. I had been going around calling the other Servants just now. Lancer had agreed; he should have caught up by now."

". . . The other Servants?"

"I have squashed Assassin to death, and Berserker is out of the question. As for Archer . . . calling him would be useless. He's not the type to respond to collusions."

Saber nodded, and her gauntlet hand struck her breastplate with great sombriety. "Understood. I have no objection to cooperation. King of Conquerors, although this is just a brief alliance, let us swear loyalty together."

"Huhu, it's good that we have a common understanding when it comes to battles . . . Hmm? What's wrong? You Masters aren't happy?"

They were not unhappy, however; Irisviel was just somewhat daunted at the practical sportsmanship displayed by Rider and Saber, who had shelved their past grudge for the moment. As for Waver, he did not even try to hide his wariness, peeking timidly from the driver's seat of Rider's chariot, and not trying to get down at all.

In killing the enemy, or forming alliances, there is no room for personal feelings on the battlefield. Cold judgement was necessary —both Servants shared the same perspective in this matter. This is a spirit which could not be shared had they not gone through similarly troubled times. Nonetheless, whatever they were to disregard now, Caster's recklessness had to be stopped. If an oath was good enough to build trust, the most prudent decision now would be to join forces here.

"I don't mind. On behalf of Einsbern, I accept the truce. Master of Rider, is that all right with you?"

At Irisviel's call, Waver nodded reluctantly.

"Einsbern, what is your plan? I heard from Lancer just now that this is not your first time fighting Caster?"

Indeed. For Saber, this was the return match of that fight in their forest. They had barely managed to fight off Caster with Lancer's help, but having acquired incomparable battle powers, Caster had come to fight back. Nevertheless, this time Lancer was not here, and they had formed an alliance with Rider. The way things are going, it was not all gloom and doom.

"Anyway, we have to defeat him swiftly. Right now, that monster's existence is probably being sustained by Caster's prana, but once it acquires an independent source and becomes self-sufficient, things would be out of our hands. To stop Caster before that . . ."

Satisfied, Saber nodded. ". . . His grimoire, right?"

The autonomic summon prana kiln, Prelati's Spellbook—the extraordinary Noble Phantasm was now buried with Caster's body inside the sea monster's heart.

"Indeed. We have to settle this before before he beaches the shore to begin his meal. But . . ." Frowning in displeasure, Rider gazed at that dark green giant which coiled round and round. "Caster is in the depths of that massive flesh mound. Well, what should we do?"

"Drag him out. Can't do anything else."

At Rider's grumble, a new voice responded from the darkness behind. Under the street lights, the resplendent silhouette of twin lances came into view. It was Lancer, arriving slightly later than the heaven-crossing chariot. Finally, the three-Servant anti-Caster alliance had assembled.

"If he would just show his Noble Phantasm, I can destroy his technique with a blow from my Gáe Dearg . . . Naturally, I don't think that guy would easily allow that to happen."

"Lancer, you can hit Caster's Noble Phantasm from the river side by hurling the lance?"

At Saber's question, Lancer laughed audaciously. "If he would only show that thing, it would be no trouble at all. Are you looking down on us lance-wielding Heroic Spirits?"

"Okay. So Rider and I will cover the front. Is that all right, King of Conquerors?"

"I don't mind, but . . . even if my chariot doesn't need a road, how do you plan to attack the enemy in the river, Saber?"

Asked thus by Rider, this time it was Saber's turn to grin. "This body of mine has received divine protection from the lady of the lake. No watery body can stop my advance."

"Oh? That's something quite rare . . . I really wish you would join the ranks of my men."

Saber, her beautiful eyebrows usually ruffling at such a comment, shrugged off Rider's selfish comment with a sharp glare instead. "You will pay the price of that careless remark another time. Digging Caster out of that monster is the top priority for now."

"Haha, aye! Well then, let me strike the first blow." With a roar of laughter, Rider lashed at the oxen of his chariot, dashing up to the empty sky with clapping thunder. Ignoring the shrieks issuing from Waver, who apparently was not prepared mentally, the King of Conquerors' galloping Noble Phantasm charged straight at the gargantuan sea monster.

"Saber, good luck!"

Nodding at Irisviel who called out to her, the King of Knights leaped from the bank onto the river again. The shiny greaves hit the water surface, scattering brilliant silver splashes. But her toes did not sink into the water; it took the force of her sprinting foot with the firmness of solid earth. It was a miracle bestowed on the king by the spirit of the lake.

The closer she got, the more the figure of the sea monster grew. Towering above Saber, it overwhelmed her with its odious presence. Like snakes, the curvy tentacles covering it stretched to intercept the approaching King of Knights. But neither its strangeness nor odiousness could hinder her sprint. Right now, fear and impatience were the same in Saber's heart.

"Let's settle this, Caster!"

The beheading strike of the Barrier of the Wind King, swung over her head with renewed fighting spirit, struck the sea monster with a merciless stroke.

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Somewhere far away, within thunderclouds above the flight altitude of birds, whispers could be heard being exchanged over digitally encrypted wireless radios.

"Control to Diablo 1, come in!"

"This is Diablo 1, loud and clear. Anything?"

"Request from Fuyuki city police for disaster relief operation. Stop patrolling immediately, get there now."

"Disaster relief operation?" Hearing those words from the headphone, First Class Lieutenant Ougi doubted his ears. Messages from helicopters or P3C were normal, but for a mere disaster to hail an F15 fighter from its maritime border patrol, what on earth could it be?

"Control, clarifying order contents. What happened?"

At the other side of the wireless radio, there was a brief, awkward silence. "... Ah, okay, don't laugh ... a monster had appeared."

To hear such words in the cockpit of a jet cruising at subsonic speed, what a first-rate joke! Not laughing was an absurd request. "That's the best! Signing up with the air force was worthwhile after all."

"Anyway it is an official order. Diablo 1, observe and report the situation at Mion River."

"..... It's a joke right. Oi?"

"Diablo 1, repeat."

The irritated voice of the controller told Ougi he had been dragged into this ridiculous prank as well. Sighing, he gave a fixed reply monotonously.

"Diablo 1, roger that. On my way to Mion river mouth for scouting. Over!"

Despite that, Captain Ougi suddenly became inclined to believe the contents of the conversation that just transpired. When the thought that such an absurd conversation might be recorded in the voice recorder crossed his mind, he felt an awkward wish to run away or hide himself in a hole.

"... Diablo 11, per the previous conversation. Turn back. Let's go back!"

"Roger. But ... is that all right?" The pilot of the consort plane Diablo 11, Third Class Lieutenant Kobayashi asked in a tone which did not hide his suspicion toward that absurd order. Nonetheless, true or not, he had no choice but to carry out the orders relayed to him. At least, the only consolation was that his destination, Fuyuki city was on way back to his base. He did not know who was responsible for this, but at least jet fuel wastage from needless loitering would be kept to a minimum.

"If there really is a monster, will we get permission to open fire?" At Third Class Lieutenant Kobayashi's semi-desperate words, First Class Lieutenant Ougi snorted again. "If this is a monster film, we are surely playing the role of cannon fodder—the underdogs from Ultraman."

"That's not funny."

In the navigators' hearts, the thunderous roar of the afterburner as the F15J rolled over rendered its figure with usual gallantry.

– 86:30:16

Archer looked toward the distant, waveborne battle of Heroic Spirits from high in the air.

"What a disgraceful sight."

The King of Heroes rode upon a shining ark of gold and emerald, 500m above the ground. The Gate of Babylon, treasury of Gilgamesh, the primeval hero who once owned all the world's treasures, stored within it the original forms of many treasures praised by the legends and myths of later men. The golden ark floating in the air is also one of those divine secret treasures. Indeed, this is the flying contraption that was passed from Babylon to India and recorded in the two epic sagas Ramayana and Mahabharata as the Vimana.

"Although they are curs, they are at least famous warriors . . . I never thought they would stoop as low as to form an alliance to finish that filthy thing. There should be a limit to deplorability. Don't you think so, Tokiomi?"

Unlike the languid and heedless Archer, Tousaka Tokiomi, permitted to share a seat on the ark, was filled with anxious anger. Magecraft was to be used in secret—it was indeed due to the need to obey this principle that the Tousaka lineage was appointed this land's Second Owner[3] by the Association. Caster's rampage not

3 Second Owner A 'supervisor' appointed by the Mage's Association, typically a famed magus, to manage a particular lot of spiritual ground. If another magus wishes to settle in the area, he or she must first greet the Second Owner and request permission to construct a workshop.

only threatened the progress of the Holy Grail War, it trampled Tokiomi's own prestige.

It would be a horrid tragedy if the liberated beast were to run mad. If that happens, it would no longer be a simple matter of finishing Caster's bounty, or properly conducting Heaven's Feel. Right now, this monster must be eliminated as soon as possible. The dignity of the Tousaka name would be at stake if the number of witnesses increased.

"O King, that monster is an evil creature laying waste to your garden, a sinner that deserves death by any means!"

"That's the work of the gardener." Archer immediately rebuked Tokiomi's request. "Could it be, Tokiomi, that you regard this great treasure of mine as a gardener's hoe?"

"That is not what I meant! But as you can see—they won't be able to hold on much longer."

Truthfully, it is evident that the battle is progressing in despairing fashion. Although Saber and Rider's blades continued to slash the sea demon's gigantic body with no respite, it showed no signs of being wounded. The Servants did not hold back; the unyielding sword that cleaved rocks and the iron hooves that brought forth roaring thunder; they ruthlessly carved out the sea demon's flesh, scattering them in waves of blood and decay. However, the shredded wounds were filled by new flesh in the blink of an eye.

The demonic monsters that Caster summoned and commanded previously also had physical regeneration abilities, so this was not surprising. However, the giant sea demon this time was indeed enormous in size. It was as if they were digging a hole in a marsh;

the damage of the two Servants combined could not keep pace with the monster's regeneration. Even the utmost effort and combined attacks of the King of Knights and King of Conquerors could only slow down the sea demon's progress toward the river bank by a little.

"This is a great opportunity to display the majesty of a true hero. Please, give the command!"

The King of Heroes gave Tokiomi a glance of displeasure, then swung his right hand, Four swords and spears appeared in the air next to him. The shining primeval Noble Phantasms unleashed a thunderous roar, and flew to impale the filthy mountain of meat that wriggled down below.

Saber and Rider reacted immediately and jumped away to avoid being caught in the attack, but Caster's sea monster was not so agile. The four Noble Phantasms hit it head on. Their power, enough to split mountains, blew one-third of the giant beast's body into nothingness. It was a mighty impact without precedent, but Caster laughed out loud, the sound even more piercing than before.

"How can it be . . .?" Tokiomi was dumbfounded. Beneath him, the wriggling meat mountain swelled up like a balloon, repairing the damage as he watched. The physical structure of the giant meat lump was perhaps as simple as an amoeba. It had no bones or organs, and hence no weaknesses. Its movement would not be impaired no matter which body part was destroyed, and it could speedily restore the destroyed parts with its mighty regeneration ability.

"We're leaving, Tokiomi. I can't watch that filthy thing a second longer." Archer spat out, his crimson irises expressed his revulsion.

"But . . . please wait, King of Heroes!"

"Tokiomi, I have used four Noble Phantasms for your honor. I do not wish to retrieve them now that they've been defiled by *that thing*. Don't take my leniency so cheaply!"

"You are the only one who can defeat that monster!" Tokiomi desperately persisted. In such a situation, he had no time to observe the prudence befitting a liege.

"Against a regeneration ability of this level, the only sure method is to annihilate it with one blow. The only one who can do this is you, the King of Heroes, and the Sword of Rupture—"

"Fool!" This time it was Archer who raged, his pupils burning crimson. "Draw my greatest treasure, Ea, here? You are senseless, Tokiomi! I should have your head for speaking such rash words to the King!"

"..." Tokiomi lowered his gaze, gritting his teeth, and stayed silent. Indeed, it is impossible. With Gilgamesh's pride, he would only draw his his trump card, his cherished blade, against an opponent he acknowledged. However, there was no other way to completely destroy Caster's sea demon. That was also the truth.

He was forcibly reminded of the Command Seals on his right hand. Even if he used one here, he could obtain another one from the Holy Church as the reward for defeating Caster. However, such a choice would definitely shatter the working relationship between the King of Heroes and himself.

In that case, he could only place his hope on other Servants. If Caster was successfully destroyed by the other Servants, the other Masters would gain the additional Command Seals held by Father Risei. With constrained anger, Tokiomi balled his hands into fists, digging his nails into his palm. How had things progressed in such an unexpected direction? It was supposed to be a perfectly planned and prepared Heaven's Feel; how had it turned into such a mad and chaotic situation?

At that moment, a thunderous sound tore apart the sky. Tokiomi lifted his head stiffly. The unilluminating thunder could only be the residual noise of a sonic boom. The paired lights that flew across the night sky, north to south, were the identification lights of jet-propelled fighter aircraft.

"Damn it ..." The situation was deteriorating rapidly with every passing moment. Tousaka Tokiomi, the Second Owner of Fuyuki, could do nothing but look on.

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The strange scene spread below them shocked the two Eagle jet pilots speechless.

"... What is ... that?" Captain Ougi wracked his brain, pondering the possibility that his eyes were playing tricks on him; the other alternative was to doubt his own sanity.

"And there're some strange lights at six o'clock. It's not a helicopter ... is it a UFO?" The stunned voice of his wingman, Second Lieutenant Kobayashi, made the situation clear. This wasn't an illusion only he was seeing.

"Control to Diablo 1. Situation report."

"The situation—it's, uh—" How should he explain this? A disaster? An unknown craft? Airspace intrusion? *Monster*—no, that could not be considered. There was no codeword for that. Any explaination of this must be founded on current knowledge. However, such knowledge far surpassed Captain Ougi's capacity for thought.

"I'll go a bit lower to have a closer look."

"Wait—Kobayashi, hold it!" A nameless evil chill creeped down his back; Captain Ougi reflexively tried to stop his wingman. However, Kobayashi's F15 had left its circling pattern for a descent.

"Pull back, Diablo 11!"

"If we observe it a bit closer, we'll know—" The two fighter jets had ceased to be onlookers. The opponent was not a modern weapon, like anti-aircraft artillery or missile, and Lieutenant Kobayashi had no way to estimate the range of the enemy's attacks. Besides, it was impossible to react in the blink of an eye to tentacles which could stretch over 100M.

He did figure out what was happening even as he lost control of the craft. He seemed to have smacked into an invisible wall, and was now spiralling into a fall. All he could do was scream. His circumstances were fortunate compared to what Captain Ougi was seeing. Numerous thick and robust web-like extensions stretched out from the surface of the meat lump on the river and entangled Kobayashi's craft, forcibly dragging the plane down against the turbofan engine's thrust. Such a scene could only be called a nightmare. The plane did not explode as it smashed into the meat

lump; the F15, reduced to scrap iron, sank deeply into the gigantic primeval creature and was swallowed without remnant.

"Kobayashi—" Having witnessed everything, Captain Ougi's mind passed human limits of thought and comprehension, and was left with a perception alien to common sense. *Aah, it—was swallowed—*

"Control to Diablo I. What's going on?! Report!"

"Eyes, it has eyes, so many eyes . . ." Through the thick mist, Captain Ougi could still see, with immense clarity, the wart-like eyes that emerged on the surface of the meat lump, which opened simultaneously and stared at the prey above them. Captain Ougi could feel that gaze even in the airtight cockpit. That was it. It was hungry beyond all imagining, it had swallowed Diablo II, and it now focused on its next prey with a glare like death . . . and overwhelming horror exploded instead into violent anger.

"—Diablo I, engaging!"

"W-wait, Ougi! Just what is—?"

He disabled the noisy radio communication and disengaged all safeties. 4 AIM–7F/M Sparrows, 4 AIM–9 Sidewinders, 940 rounds for the M61 Vulcan—all in tip-top condition. *Kill it before I am swallowed.* Ougi's lips twisted with mad laughter. At the control column of a F15, the most powerful fighter jet in the world, he was the true God of Death. *Must avenge Kobayashi . . . rip that thing to shreds, burn it to ashes.*

He turned the plane around, locking onto the target with the HUD reticle. He would never miss such a giant enemy. A saturation run, firing all weapons at once—

Powerful tremors rocked the plane's body. Target at six o'clock —his stressed battle instincts informed him. As he turned to look behind, his half-shattered consciousness received its last blow. An inky-black figure suddenly appeared on the other side of the canopy, fully exposed to the subsonic convection currents at the back of the plane. Behind the helmet, his gleaming eyes emanated blazing fire, and his gaze harbored endless hatred and madness as he stared intently into the cockpit. In the sealed, radio-silent iron coffin, Captain Ougi gave a final hoarse scream—it reached no ears.

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Tousaka Tokiomi, his sight boosted by magecraft, watched the F15 streaking through the air. The shadow that suddenly appeared on the back of the plane, armored in dull shimmering titanium, could only be a Servant—nothing else was capable of something like that. Judging from its appearance, it must be the Berserker mentioned in Kirei's reports.

The armor's blackness corrupted the fighter jet's outer shell bit by bit, like ink. Indeed, it was Berserker's special ability, which had robbed Archer's Noble Phantasms and transformed scrap iron into demonic swords and spears—perhaps that power allowed him to use anything which could be remotely conceptualized as a weapon? The black prana again corroded the sonic silver wings, and even that epitome of modern science was instantly changed into a monstrous form.
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"■■■■■■■▯▯▯▯■■!" Having subjugated the 20M-long craft under his control, the black knight gripped its back lightly, like a dragon rider of legend. His howl, full of vengeance, reverberated through the night sky.

Kirei had informed Tokiomi of the primary targets of Berserker and its Master. Unexpectedly, the fiendish steel bird, now completely corroded by the pitch-black prana, turned its nose and charged directly at Archer's airborne Vimana.

"Oho, is it that mad dog again? Interesting." Unlike the initial battle at the warehouse district, Archer now smiled wickedly and rose to Berserker's challenge. Tokiomi had no idea of what may have changed the King of Heroes' thoughts, nor did he want to ponder them. After all, Tokiomi had already vowed in the past to defeat that enemy with his own hands. He was not put off with doing it himself, especially for an opponent which troubled him personally. Standing at the edge of the ark, Tokiomi looked toward the highest vantage point—the ideal spot for spying—and found, to his expectations, the opponent on the high-rise apartment complex where he locked his gaze.

He had no intention of concealing himself. The left side of his face was like a corpse, distorted and stiff with pain. His right eye was like a devil's, burning with the flames of hatred. His eyes crossed with Tokiomi's and wordlessly declared battle.

"O King, let me be the Master's opponent."

"Very well. You can have your fun."

The Vimana glided through the air and brought Tokiomi right above his target. It was an 80M drop to the roof. For a magus, such a distance was nothing to be afraid of.

"The fortunes of war upon us." Tokiomi took his Mystic Code staff, smoothed his overcoat, and fearlessly leapt down from the sky. Alone on the Vimana, Archer gazed at the pursuing steel shadow, his eyes burning with a sadistic light.

"A despicable and lowly dog, fit only to prostrate on the ground, now soars into the heavens where kings dance. Even as a jester, you are beyond help, cur!" He unleashed the Gate of Babylon, throwing out six Noble Phantasms in rapid succession. Sparking with blinding brilliance, spears and blades charged like light-trailing comets to meet Berserker. The twin turbofan engine, enhanced by Berserker's alien power, released a monstrous roar. The black F15 exponentially increased its relative velocity, breaking through a gap in the tightly-knit screen of Noble Phantasms.

Though deftly avoided, Archer's Noble Phantasms did not lose their lethality. Three of them—an axe, a scythe, and a scimitar—spun immediately, changing direction and closing in on the F15's tail. Right before impact, the black F15 writhed its ailerons and flaps like a living creature, escaping the blade edges of Archer's Noble Phantasms w, which was propping up his chin on the edge of the shipith aerodynamically impossible abruptness. A second, then a third barrel roll later, the barrage of Noble Phantasms scattered away into the sky. The intense Gs of the first spin, though nothing to Berserker, killed Captain Ougi in the cockpit immediately, rupturing his internal organs.

Dodging all the attacks, the F15 aimed its nose at Archer with an Immelmann turn, the pylons under its wings sputtering the flames of rocket motors. Two Sparrow missiles attacked Archer's

Vimana with vengeance. Though ordinary weapons were useless in a battle of Servants, the weapons corrupted by Berserker were of a different caliber. Carrying the prana of hatred, every single 26LB round of explosives carried annihilating might.

"How impertinent . . ."

Archer boldly smiled and placed his hand on the Vimana's helm. Immediately, the ark of light accelerated and evaded the missiles' attack with an elegance unmatchable by Berserker's brute force control. The legendary flying Noble Phantasm, crossing the sky at the speed of thought, had already surpassed the laws of physics.

"□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□!"

The mad black knight roared. Responding to the malicious call, the front stabilizers of the two Sparrows suddenly twisted, once again baring their fangs at the Vimana which had evaded the first attack. Even the electronic radar-guided missiles had been transformed into magic weapons that chased the subject of Berserker's hatred like hounds.

Archer sneered at the incoming threat, opened the Gate of Babylon once again. Deploying two shields in the sky, he struck down the cursed missiles. As the ark shook from the impact of the explosion, the red eyes of the King of Heroes gradually stained with a shade of fanaticism.

"Interesting . . . I haven't played like this for a long time. To think even a mere wild beast could please me so!" Archer's laughter rose as the Vimana's altitude sharply increased. Berserker's F15 once again gave chase, clawing at its back. The two instantly broke through the sound barrier, falling up through

the sea of clouds in the night sky, climbing ever higher as the dogfight continued.

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The thick evening mist enveloped the icy air as Tousaka Tokiomi descended from the sky. A controlled descent, achieved by manipulating mass and air currents, was nothing difficult for a proficient magus. Perhaps it should be said that the degree of proficiency is determined by the elegance of its execution.

His path of descent was straight and true, his landing was like a feather's, his clothes and hair were completely unruffled—an ordinary magus would give heartfelt praise for such an exemplary and skilled move. But Matou Kariya had already transformed into something else. There was absolutely no respect or admiration for magecraft in his heart. Respect had turned to hatred, and admiration to anger. For Kariya, whose body was twisted into a thing ugly beyond comparison, Tokiomi's elegance and flamboyance deserved to be cursed. *You bastard—you have always been like this.* His speech, his manners, and that royal disposition—this man had been perfect ever since the day he appeared before Aoi and Kariya. That elegance and ease had always made Kariya feel the difference in their status. However, it would end on that night. Elegance, something that this man paid the most attention to, was nothing on the battlefield where it was each man for himself. Right now, right here, the Tousaka family creed that was held in such pride will be dragged through the mud and destroyed . . .

Berserker, already in battle, began to mercilessly wring Kariya for his prana. The agonizing pain caused by the maddening activity of the Crest worms inside him was as if his hands and feet were being slashed by razors. His bones were rent, and his eyes blurred. However, such a pain was nothing compared to the hatred that tore at Kariya's heart.

"—It seems you've *changed*, Matou Kariya." Tokiomi's sharp, narrowing eyes of pity displayed his ease before battle, taunting Kariya. "Discarding the way of magecraft, yet still longing after the Holy Grail and even returning to it in a form like this ... Your shameful sight alone slanders the degraded Matou family."

Kariya replied with a mocking laugh—though it sounded like the chirping of insects even to himself. "Tousaka Tokiomi, I'll ask you only one thing ... Why did you hand Sakura to Zouken?"

"... What?" Tokiomi furrowed his brows at the unexpected question. "Is this something to be worrying about at this time?"

"Answer me, Tokiomi!"

Tokiomi sighed, and said to the agitated Kariya. "—You should know it without needing to ask. I only want my beloved daughter to have a happy future."

"What ... did you say?" Kariya's brain momentarily blanked out from such an incomprehensible reply. Tokiomi continued with an indifferent tone.

"Any magus with a second child would be troubled—the secret craft can only be passed on to one of them. It is a dilemma where one of the children must fall into mediocrity."

Mediocrity—That word echoed in Kariya's empty mind. Sakura, who had lost her smile, and the image of Rin playing with

Aoi . . . Tokiomi's words mixed into his few happy memories. The image of the mother and her daughters from so long ago—did this man cleave it apart and discarded it with the word 'mediocrity'?

"My wife's motherly body is outstanding. Both Rin and Sakura were born with equal and rare natural talents. Both daughters must have the protection of a house of magi. Robbing one's potential for the other's future—no father would hope for such a tragedy to occur."

Kariya could not comprehend these reasons pouring from Tokiomi's mouth—no, he did not want to understand. He felt that he was going to start throwing up on the spot if he understood even a small part of this magus's philosophy.

"The only thing to do to preserve both sisters' talents was to give one away for adoption. Old man Matou's request was a godsend. As a house that knows of the Holy Grail's existence, the possibility of reaching Akasha is even higher. Even if I can't complete it, there's still Rin, and if Rin fails there would still be Sakura; someone will always inherit the Tousaka family's wish."

"You bastard!" How could he speak such a despairing truth with a calm expression? If they both walk the road to Akasha, then—

". . .You wish them to fight each other? Sister against sister?!"

Against Kariya's accusation, Tokiomi gave an unbidden laugh and nodded with a cold expression. "Even if such a situation was to result, it would be a happy occasion for the remnants of my house. If we succeed, the glory will be in our own hands; even if we fail, the glory will belong to our ancestral name. There is no such thing as a confrontation without sorrow."

"You're insane!"

Facing Kariya, who was gritting his teeth, Tokiomi merely returned a cold glance and called out mockingly. "It's a waste to tell you anyway. You are one who does not understand the nobility of magecraft at all; one who left the way and betrayed the art."

"Bullshit!" Hatred and anger, surpassing their uttermost limit, stimulated the Crest worms within Kariya into life. An evil chill and agonizing pain passed through his entire body, but it was a blessing for Kariya. *Erode me, devour my body. Let all the prana created thus become a curse for my nemesis . . .* Worms slithered out from the shadows around them in waves, looking like rat-sized maggots, and gathered in one place. These were the fangs Kariya had acquired from Matou Zouken before he became a Master—weapons to deal with battles outside the laws of the ordinary world.

"I won't forgive any of you disgusting magi! I'll kill you! And Zouken! Kill until none of you are left!!" The worms that took in Kariya's hatred twitched and twisted together in agony. Soon, shimmering, steely shells and wings emerged from cracks straight down their backs. One by one, the slithering worms metamorphosed into giant beetles, buzzing as they spread their wings and flew in battalions around Kariya. A giant group amassed in the blink of an eye. The Blade Wing worms slid into battle formation as they grinded their sharp jaws threateningly and ferociously. As a worm user, this was Matou Kariya's deadliest hand.

Against a mass of carnivorous worms which could devour a bull and crush even its bones in an instant, Tousaka Tokiomi's expression remained impassive. His level as a magus was far above Kariya, after all. The suicidal secret craft that Kariya released was neither awe-inspiring nor frightening for Tokiomi. He could easily spite this mockery of fate in this battle between two former rival suitors.

"—From the moment a magus is born, he is someone with power. Some day, he will achieve a greater power. This responsibility was already flowing in his blood before he realized this destiny. That is what it means to be born into this world as the child of a magus."

Tokiomi said coldly as he lifted his Mystic Code and unleashed the craft of fire from the giant ruby embedded in its head.

The defensive form that traced the Tousaka family crest in the air turned into crimson flames and scorched the night air. It was an aggressive defense magecraft that burned everything it touched to ashes. he felt childish, using it against a complete novice of an enemy, but he had no intention of holding back.

After all—"The Matou magecraft was passed into Sakura's hands because you refused to inherit the family headship. I have to thank you for that . . . however, I would never forgive a man like you. Escaping the responsibility of your inheritance is a weakness, vile behavior which can never be overlooked. You are a disgrace to the way of magecraft. Since we meet once again, I will have to exterminate you."

"Enough nonsense, you inhuman bastard."

"You're wrong. Being responsible for yourself is the first requirement of being human. If you cannot do even this, you are only fit to be a dog, Kariya."

"O worms, devour him, tear him apart!"

The dancing, scorching flames confronted the howling hive of insects. The third deathmatch of the night had begun.

– 84:25:22

"That's . . . awesome! Totally awesome!" Uryuu Ryuunosuke was so overwhelmed with excitement that, heedless of his surroundings, he raised his voice to a strange shriek, his whole body shaking. Though he was in the crowd of onlookers now gathering at the riverside, none of them were concerned with Ryuunosuke's odd behavior. Every set of eyes were fixed on the otherworldly, impossible phenomenon unfolding before them.

On the river's surface was a giant rampaging monster. In the sky, sparks flew as a UFO clashed with a Self-Defense Force fighter. This was a spectacle never before seen, one that anyone would deride as hackneyed.

Serves you all right! Ryuunosuke cheered. Their mouths agape, all were staring dumbly at the reality before their eyes. At their wit's end, all they could do was watch as common sense, the worthless idol they blindly worshiped and believed completely, came crashing down.

How's that, you bastards? I've always been on the losing side . . . until now. Frustrating, isn't it? Pathetic, eh? None of you even imagined—even tried to imagine—how awesome and bizarre the world outside the walls of common sense is. Me? Of course I knew. I've expected it, hoped for it—that someday I would see something tremendous. I only ever did the abnormal, seeking out novelties every day, wandering in a frenzy. And I've finally found it, the treasure chest I've been seeking for. God definitely exists, and this extraordinary sight is my proof.

This is a farewell to tedium; no need to devote time and effort to murder any more. Lots of people were going to die; crushed, ripped apart, smashed open, devoured, and dying, dying, dying endlessly. The color of a blondy's guts, the sensation of a black man's spleen, even those bowels that I have not seen before; I can experience them one after another! Day by day, I'll be swept up in interesting things, right in the center of the world!

"Aaaahhh! The Lord has come! The Lord has come!" He raised his fists high in triumph, singing and springing and celebrating this victory of a lifetime. Ryuunosuke shouted encouragements to his rampaging monster of a comrade. "Go for it, Sir Bluebeard! Destroy them! Slaughter them! This is God's own toy box!"

Just then, he was shoved hard by an unseen hand. Falling painfully on his rump, he looked around, shocked. No one was near enough to touch him; instead, the people around him screamed and backed away as they saw him. He felt like an absurdity, like those things in the river and in the sky.

"What is it? Hey, what?" As Ryuunosuke expectantly asked those around him, he casually put his hand to his stomach and felt something hot and slippery . . . then he started fixedly at his own crimson-dyed hand.

"Whoooa . . ." Pure, captivating red. The glistening, vivid, fundamental color was what he had been seeking. *Ah, this is it*—Ryuunosuke instantly understood, a faint smile on his pale lips. True red—the color he was searching for all along, which he had never obtained. He embraced his abdomen, which gushed with fresh blood. "I see . . . I never realized, huh . . ."

The darkest spot is under the candlestick—those words were well said. Intoxicated, his skull filled with surging analgesia. The second shot struck him in the center of the forehead, blowing away his head above the nose, while his lips still traced a smile of total bliss.

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Got him—confident, Emiya Kiritsugu, kneeling on one knee on the deck of the ship, lowered the muzzle of the Walther night vision sniper rifle. He was about 200M downstream from Caster's monster, close to the heart of the river at Fuyuki Bridge. Kiritsugu, staking out the harbor just as Caster appeared, promptly commandeered one of nearby empty yachts and arrived shortly.

Needless to say, it never crossed his mind to attack the monster. Under the cover of panic, Kiritsugu's aim was to hunt its Master. The light amplification scope's efficiency degraded as the number of particles in the air increased, making it useless in this fog. But it was no trouble for the infrared scope, crucial for differentiating magi. Kiritsugu searched for the characteristic thermal pattern within the crowd of onlookers, gunning down one of them. Anyone loitering near the riverside with active Magic Circuits must be involved in the Holy Grail War—the probability of his target being Caster's Master was over sixty percent. Taking the shot was the right choice.

Incidentally, Kiritsugu's position had obscured from his view the two warring magi on top of the nearby high-rise apartment, and they were spared his gunshots.

"... This is bad." Although that particular incident was resolved successfully, Kiritsugu's expression soured as he turned around and confirmed the situation. No matter how favorably he looked at it, Saber and Rider's strenuous attempt to halt the sea monster was going poorly. Even presuming that he had hit his target, it still took some time before the Servant, cut off from its prana supply, became unable to maintain its existence in the present era, and disappeared. If Caster reached the bank and began feeding before that happened, it would be the end. Once it gained a new prana source, they would have no choice but to eliminate it physically.

Finally, the immortal, infinitely-regenerating monster was on the verge on pushing onto the shallow riverside.

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Though she grinded her teeth in despair, Saber was neither frightened nor daunted, and continued to brandish her sword. No matter how deep her slashes, the wound would be healed instantly without a scar. This was fruitless effort—no, if they could just slow the monster down even by a little, this battle would be meaningful. However, at this rate, their efforts were no more than futile resistance.

If only she could use her left hand ... Although it was an unavoidable regret, Saber could not help but think of it. Even the

exceptionally powerful Noble Phantasms possessed by Rider and Archer would not be enough to bring down this monster. No matter what kind of force they brought to bear, it would be meaningless if all its injuries could be regenerated instantly. To defeat this horror, one had to deliver a decisive strike that would obliterate it down to the last scrap of flesh. What is needed is not an Anti-Army, but an Anti-Fortress Noble Phantasm.

Excalibur could achieve this, but Saber could not use it now. It was a fatal secret technique which released an enormous surge of power in a single blow, and could exhaust her entire prana supply. But she needed both hands to swing the sword for this attack. Naturally, it put Saber's pride at risk to complain to Lancer about this—it was beyond consideration. The handicap of her left hand was her debt for vowing to settle her match with Lancer fairly. In the Einsbern forest, Lancer came of his own free will to serve as her left hand; in the name of the King of Knights, she must repay him for his spirit.

"Hey, Saber! We'll accomplish nothing like this. Retreat for now!" At Rider's voice coming from his chariot directly above her, Saber replied angrily. "What nonsense are you speaking! If we do not stop it here—"

"This is a stalemate! Just pull back. I have an idea!"

Thus compelled, she delivering another blow with all her strength as a parting gift, then dashed across the river surface in pursuit of Rider, retreating to the riverside where Lancer and Irisviel were waiting. Saber kicked off from the water and leapt onto the river bank. At the same time, Rider's chariot landed, descending from empty space accompanied by lightning.

"Listen, all of you. Whatever we do after this, we have to buy some time." Dispensing with greetings, Rider spoke urgently. Even the King of Conquerors did not maintain his easygoing composure this time. "For now, I'll drag that thing into Ionioi Hetairoi. Well, it'll probably be impossible to destroy it completely even with my elites. Confining it in my Reality Marble is the best I can do."

"What do we do after that?" At Lancer's question, his blank reply was: "No idea." Nevertheless, from his grave expression, it was obvious that he was not joking. Buying time to stave off an emergency—even with the King of Conquerors' hidden technique, this was all that could be done.

"After taking in such a giant, I can maintain my bounded field of troops for a few minutes at most. During that time, find us a strategy for victory by any means possible. Boy, you stay here too." As soon as he finished, Rider plucked Waver out of the charioteer's carriage.

"H-hey?!"

"Once the bounded field is deployed, I will have no way of knowing the situation outside. Boy, if something happens, concentrate and call me. I'll dispatch a messenger to you."

Though they were allied right now, from Waver's perspective, having him and his own Servant go separate ways and leaving himself alone with two other Servants was extremely dangerous and reckless. However, nothing can be resolved if they all simply stood on guard against their allies' treachery. Though his heart was quivering with fear, with a sullen look, the youth nodded.

"Saber, Lancer, the rest is up to you two."

"... Got it."

"... Understood."

Though the two had spoken in agreement, they were both extremely bitter. Everyone present understood that Rider's decision was simply an emergency reaction without an actual solution. Nevertheless, he had placed his full trust in the Heroic Spirits he had appraised. Gathering his resolve, Rider aimed the chariot at the savage giant monster, and charged, no distress on his face, without looking back.

– 84:23:46

Although this original game had entertained Archer for a while, he soon grew bored of the aerial battle after the third, then fourth exchange of endless Holy Phantasms and missiles.

Finally, in this repetitive dogfight, Archer's Vimana was in a position pursuing Berserker's F15. If he reduced the distance between them a bit more, he would be in a perfect position to attack. Aware of this, Berserker pulled further from his pursuer, pushing his craft to full throttle, then using the acceleration to perform a full vertical descent.

"Stop your useless struggle." Archer accelerated the Vimana while chuckling, and was once again on Berserker's tail effortlessly. In the blink of an eye, the two shot through the clouds, falling back down to the flickering lights of Fuyuki.

"I might as well plunge you headlong into the dirt. How does that sound, cur?"

Archer ringed his prepared Noble Phantasms around Berserker, restraining him in every direction and sealing off his retreat. The only route open to Berserker was straight down, toward the Mion river—on a collision course with Caster's sea monster, which was creeping towards the river bank. Trying to soften the impact of the inevitable collision by any means, the F15 opened all its flaps. Clawing at the atmosphere, it grasped for maximum deceleration.

At that instant, the huge lump of meat disappeared. At point-blank range, Rider shouted and activated Ionioi Hetairoi, leaving

Archer and Berserker unaware of the reasons. Nevertheless, not wanting them to be stained by another drop of mud, Archer foresaw the timing of the collision, and dematerialized his Noble Phantasms. Not missing the chance, the demonic F15 twisted its nose upwards just before it touched the surface of the water, and escaped the crash with an almost-perpendicular course.

Raising curtains of water on both sides from the shockwave, the black F15 glided on the river, almost touching the water, and passed the Servants observing the progress from the riverbank. At that moment, the shining figure of the knight, coated in silver and azure armor, was clearly burned into the mad dark knight's eyes. Within that black helmet, the pair of eyes, brimming with stagnant hatred, fiercely burned like a crimson blaze.

To Tousaka Tokiomi's standards, this was too crude to be called a battle of magecraft; it was nothing but a comical farce. He was simply maintaining his defensive boundary disinterestedly, and had not executed anything which could be considered an attack. In spite of that, his opponent, Matou Kariya, was already on the verge of death. It was complete self-destruction. Kariya's use of magecraft inflicted fatal injury on himself. Though Kariya had realized this, he foolishly continued beyond his limit without hesitation, and paid the obvious price.

One could tell he was in a dire state at a glance. Capillaries ruptured all over his body, spilling blood incessantly. He could not stand straight, and his staggering figure seemed to be drowning clumsily in a bloody mist. His eyes were stretched wide from

intense pain, and one could not tell if there was any sense left in him.

You were raging so passionately just now . . . and when the lid is opened, this is your condition?

The saddest part was that, despite utilizing such life-consuming quantities of prana, Kariya's attacks did not scathe a single hair on Tokiomi. The summer insects which flew into the fire were like a proverbial stage show. The swarm of beetles simply charged endlessly into Tokiomi's incendiary boundary, with not a single one breaking through; all were scorched to ashes. In the first place, challenging such flames in frontal assault was an exceedingly stupid move for a bug user. Yet, Kariya did not slow his assault. He fruitlessly spurred the insects on at his own expense, turning them to cinders.

This was beyond laughable. At this utterly powerless enemy, Tokiomi felt unsurpassed disdain, and now pity. Before long, the flames would burn away all of Kariya's insects. At that point, Kariya would probably die wretchedly, unable to withstand the agony. Tokiomi merely had to focus on maintaining his craft while calmly observing him. The fight would end within this impregnable fortress. However, for Tokiomi who followed the noble path of magecraft, the disgraceful behavior of a fallen, corrupted magus, displayed before him, was too unpleasant to watch.

"Intensive Einascherung." Responding to the two-word spell, the flames of the defensive boundary curled like a snake, stretching toward Kariya. It was doubtful whether this instant-

made magus even knew the principles for countering an offensive spell.

"I . . . I'll kill you . . . Tokiomi . . . Zo-u-ken . . ."

Despite being burned alive, Kariya did not scream; but merely repeated an endless murmur of curses. Devoured from inside by the worms, it was possible he no longer had a sense of pain to feel the heat with. Writhing with flames enveloping his body, he broke through the fence, stepped over the edge of the roof, and fell into the darkness of the alley below.

Cleanly sweeping away all the remaining bugs there with his conflagration, Tokiomi undid his craft and sighed, fixing his collar. The corpse—it would not require confirmation. Even if there was still breath in him, he would not last long. He had only to wait for Berserker's annihilation—the inevitable result of losing his contractor.

Tokiomi only expected Matou to resign and pass up this Heaven's Feel. He could not understand the intention behind sending the disinherited outcast, Kariya, as an improvised Master. Ultimately, Tokiomi did not understand the desire which caused Kariya to hasten and join the war.

It was a victory that brought no sense of achievement, trailing a bitter taste. Without further thought, Tokiomi turned to the river and began examining the battles that raged around Caster.

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Thanks to Rider's clever scheme, the gigantic sea monster had disappeared without a trace from the water's surface. However,

although its form was nowhere to be seen, the Servants and magi gathered there could clearly perceive the presence of the monster raging within the plane-divergent bounded field.

"What should we do?" Unable to withstand the creeping weight of silence, Waver opened his mouth. "He said he was buying time, but if we don't think of something in the meanwhile, we'll be right where we started. Hey, Einsbern, don't you have any ideas?!"

"Speak for yourself!" From Irisviel's chest, an out-of-place, frivolous electronic sound started beeping. Irisviel herself was taken aback, and she hastily reached for it—her mobile phone, which Kiritsugu had given her for emergency use. There was no need to guess who the caller was. Nevertheless, they had not expected its use, and in her urgency Irisviel temporarily forgot how to answer the call.

"Ummm, ah . . .! What should I do with this?" She could only ask Waver, who was standing next to her. Irritated at the interruption to their conversation, Waver snatched the noisy phone from Irisviel's hand, pressed the Receive button and held it to his ear. Although a magus, Waver's family did adhere strictly to magi formalities, and he was as competent with modern gadgets as any ordinary person.

"Iri?" Now it was Waver's turn to be confused, as a low male voice issued from the speaker. He was about to return it to the owner, but ended up answering it instead.

"Er, no, I'm . . ."

"Hm? . . . I see, you're Rider's Master huh? Just as well; I need to talk to you."

"Wh-who are you?"

"It doesn't matter. Caster's disappearance was your Servant's handiwork, right?"

"... Well, yes."

"Then I have to ask: when Rider releases the Reality Marble, can he deposit its contents at a specific place?"

It was a question without a clear purpose, but in a race against time, there was no opportunity to seek the questioner's motives. Waver racked his brain for the fundamental laws governing Reality Marbles, which he had learnt at Clock Tower. Putting it with the properties of Ionioi Hetairoi which he had witnessed once, he gave a cautious reply.

"It should be possible, to a certain extent, probably a hundred meters at most. The prerogative for their reappearance lies with Rider."

"That will do. I will choose a time and send up signal flares. Release Caster directly under it. Can you do that?"

"..." The problem now was communicating this to Rider within the bounded field. Come to think of it, Rider had said he would send a messenger afterward. He was probably still conscious of the link within and without the field.

"I can do that ... I think. Probably."

Who was he speaking with? He was likely someone from Einsbern's side, but from the way he talked, Waver had no choice but to conclude that he was watching from somewhere nearby.

"One more thing. Tell Lancer this: Saber's left hand holds an anti-fortress Noble Phantasm."

"Huh?" Increasingly confused, Waver returned a question, but the conversation was quickly cut, leaving only static.

"What happened?" Feeling the meaningful gaze from Waver, Lancer asked him with suspicion.

"Um . . . there's a message for you. 'Saber's left hand is an anti-fortress Noble Phantasm', or something like that . . ."

Lancer's expression changed to astonishment as Saber's changed to awkwardness.

"Is that true, Saber?"

She had hoped to avoid bringing up the topic here, but there was no use hiding it now. Dropping her face, Saber nodded silently.

"And . . . can it bring down Caster's monster in one blow?"

"It is possible. But . . ." Nodding again, Saber stared straight at the Servant of the Spear with unwavering eyes, and continued. "Lancer, the weight of my sword is the weight of my pride. My injury from the fight with you is an honor, not a shackle. It is as you said in the forest. If I am backed by Diarmuid O'Duibhine as a substitute for my left hand, that alone is worth tens of thousands of men."

No good will come from burdening Lancer with guilt at that point. As a comrade in the conduct of chivalry, Saber wanted Lancer to welcome the conclusion without unnecessary binds. Lancer squinted silently, staring at the river, at the unseen figures of Rider's army and the sea monster at the other side separate from this plane.

". . . Saber, I cannot forgive that Caster." His low reply came softly. On the contrary, his bewitchingly beautiful eyes shone

with determination. "He treats the despair of others as righteousness, and rejoices at the spread of fear. On my oath as a knight, that is an evil I cannot overlook."

Thrusting the red lance in his right hand into the ground and releasing it, Lancer tightly gripped the remaining yellow lance in the middle with both his hands. At that moment, realizing and rejecting what the proud spearman was intending to do, Saber stared and shouted.

"Lancer, no!"

"Now, which must win? Is it Saber? Or Lancer? No, it is neither. The one thing that must claim victory here, is the chivalry we serve. Isn't that right, Heroic Spirit Arturia?" Boasting with a nonchalant smile, Lancer broke it neatly in half without hesitation. The enormous curse contained within Gáe Buidhe gushed out in a whirlwind, and scattered before their eyes into nothingness. The Noble Phantasm's physical figure rapidly disappeared, far too quickly for a legend given form. Who would have thought that a Servant would destroy his own Noble Phantasm, his trump card to absolute victory, with his own hands? Not only Saber, but Irisviel and Waver as well, were struck speechless by Lancer's actions.

"I entrust my vow of victory in the King of Knight's stroke. I'm counting on you, Saber."

The feelings in her heart took form as Saber tightened her left hand, firmly and strongly. Released from the curse of mortality, the arm of the King of Knights recovered instantly, and answered with unmistakable strength.

"It's a deal, Lancer. Right now, I swear victory upon my sword!"

The Barrier of the Wind King was now unveiled. Kicking up torrents of wind, a golden sword revealed itself. As though congratulating their imminent victory, the shining blade illuminated the darkness brilliantly.

"That's—from King Arthur's legend . . ." Finally witnessing the sacred crown-jeweled sword in front of his eyes, Waver whispered, dumbfounded. Like the dawning light at the end of the long night, the impatience and anxiety lurking in their hearts were swept away by the radiance.

Yes, this is truly the knight's ideal. It was the crystallization of all that was etched in the hearts of those in awe of the radiance; those who were placed on the bloody hell called a battlefield, fully exposed to the fear of death and despair, and who still clung to a desire: to be exalted.

"We can win . . ." Trembling with joy, Irisviel whispered ecstatically. However, as though objecting to such hope, a roar of repulsive malediction shook the night sky, spreading as it thundered. No—the screaming, unlike a voice, could not be any other but an explosive turbofan.

Saber looking up to the sky, and her gazed was met by hatred incarnate. Riding on the steel bird tainted by jet black prana, the mad Heroic Spirit once again bared his fangs at the King of Knights.

"A—urrrrrrrrrrr!" Together with Berserker's bloodcurdling roar, flames spouted from the six barrels of the 20mm Vulcan autocannon.

– 84:19:03

Emiya Kiritsugu clucked his tongue as he intently watched this unexpected turn of events. The ship had been anchored after it was moved to the appointed location, and preparations had been made to load a powered escape lifeboat aboard. Saber had also successfully regained her sure-kill Noble Phantasm; all that was left was to summon Rider back and get him to free Caster's sea demon—just as he thought this, Berserker, as though losing control of himself, suddenly shifted his focus in battle from Archer to Saber.

This was the second time Saber had been challenged by Berserker without reason. Even when they first met at the warehouse district, as soon as the black knight lost his target, he assaulted Saber like a starving beast. It could be passed off as a coincidence the first time, but not the second. He had just switched targets, completely ignoring his initial target—Archer—who was still well and alive. Of course, for Archer, one of extraordinary pride, this outrage was an inexcusable disdain.

"Have you no control? Mad dog!" Archer cursed as Vimana accelerated and soon approached Berserker's back, close enough that he could kill him for certain. There was so little distance between them that the opponent would never be able to evade the barrage of Noble Phantasms from Gate of Babylon regardless of his transcendent mobility. However, this decision backfired on him. From the underside of the F15's body, scorching fireballs,

like will-o'-the-wisps, slowly scattered in succession, washing over the nose of the trailing Vimana.

"What!?"

This armament, a flare dispenser, originally released decoy heat sources in order to throw off the enemy's heat-seeking missiles. But, demonized by Berserker's prana, they had been transfigured into tracking incendiary weapons. From their dogfight a moment ago, Archer hastily concluded that the enemy had no way of attacking a target on its tail; he could not respond to this unexpected counterattack in time. The bow of the Vimana plunged into the hive of roaring fire balls, lost control as it was surrounded by the crimson flames, and arced toward the surface of the river in a spiral.

Despite managing to bring Archer down, Berserker did not seem to think anything of it. The fiendish steel bird did not confirm Archer's whereabouts, tracking Saber relentlessly instead, and mercilessly raining 20MM rounds on her.

Though the F15 commandeered by Berserker was unknown to her, her skill of sixth sense, equivalent to precognition, allowed her to comprehend with extreme precision the nature of this threat. Before the initial strafing run struck, Saber had sensed the areal destruction which would result, realized the danger Irisviel may face on the river bank, and once again leapt onto the water surface, retreating on the river.

The result of this unavoidable decision guided her into yet another conundrum. With her skillful footwork as a Servant, Saber could dash on water with speed rivalling a jet fighter. However, this vast river surface, unmarred by obstacles, was

undoubtedly the best hunting ground for the black knight strafing from above. The bullets rained in torrents behind the dashing Saber, missing her by a hair and scattering raging sheets of water like streams of an upward waterfall.

Regardless of caliber, mere cannon shells posed no threat to Servants at all. This is especially so with Saber, who with her physical abilities could easily evade them, or even deflect the shots with the blade of her sword if she so wished. However, no matter how extraordinary the Heroic Spirit may be, the 12,000RPM firing rate of the pride of America's General Electric, the M61 autocannon, presented an unmanageable number of shots. Worse still, it now possessed the properties of a Noble Phantasm due to Berserker's prana; a single shot would prove fatal.

"And to think I finally recovered the use of my left hand . . ." Saber was bitterly regretful. Even now, it would be possible for her to use her Noble Phantasm without hesitation and destroy Berserker in the air, but the enemy's tenacious and incessant attacks offered her no opportunity for counterattack. Berserker's battle tactics were both accurate and prudent, as though informed of the full extent of Saber's abilities. To hunt a lion, the best method is to keep chasing it, not giving it a single chance to bare its fangs, strangling it; Berserker's skill seemed to reflect his understanding of this principle.

Abruptly, restless tremors spread from the river bank to its surroundings. Only the magi present knew just what these inexplicable tremors meant—their epicenter was probably the center of Rider's Reality Marble. The powerful quakes of the raging sea demon were finally beginning to affect normal space. It

was an omen that Rider's Reality Marble was finally approaching its ultimate limit.

He must inform Rider of the situation here. Waver, deciding this, began to concentrate his thoughts on calling out to his own Servant. Having no knowledge of telepathy, Waver could only rely on speech to come to a mutual understanding. However, Rider, who knew this, did say "I'll send a herald to you."

The space beside Waver abruptly shook, and a knight's form emerged. "Mithrenes of the Hetairoi rides forth to listen in the King's stead!" Awed by the intrepid demeanor of the Heroic Spirit and his simple salutation, Waver faltered. But it was not the time to pay such things heed; he mustered courage to give directions to this unfamiliar Heroic Spirit.

"I want you to release the bounded field and throw Caster out at the appointed location as soon I give the signal. You can do that, right?"

"It can be done—but it is a race against time. It appears our army inside the bounded field cannot stop that sea demon for much longer . . ."

"I know! I'm aware of that!" As Waver grumbled, he took a glance at Saber—still dodging the attacks of the black knight—with earnest prayer.

"Damn it! Berserker, that bastard . . . Can't something be done about him?!"

"—I will go."

Lancer, responding resolutely, disappeared grasping the crimson spear. Transiting into spiritual form temporarily, teh spearman accurately materialized again on the body of the F15,

grabbing the steel wings pulsing with black prana with one hand to steady himself.

"It all ends here, mad warrior!" Declaring as such, he brandished Gáe Dearg in his right hand above his head and pierced the body of the grotesque machine with the spear tip. The red, prana-interrupting spear gleamed; it was indeed the archenemy of Berserker's peculiar ability. But the black knight had had his full share of the power of this attack after the battle in the warehouse district. The mysterious Servant, maddened but not without prudence, did not make the same mistake again. Right before the red spear skewered the aircraft's body, Berserker discarded the doomed F15 and leapt high into the sky as he wrenched off the most vital part of the aircraft. The fighter jet, reverting instantly to a mass of scrap metal, crashed with Lancer still hanging on to its wings, throwing up a splendid sheet of water from the Mion river.

Berserker had seized the section which accommodated the Vulcan unit. The autocannon had avoided direct contact with Lancer's spear by a hair's breadth, and still pulsed with the jet black prana that supplemented it, retaining the properties of the black knight's Noble Phantasm.

"[redacted]!!"

Carrying six barrels and a cylindrical ammunition casing—200KG in total—Berserker once again aimed from the sky at Saber. The prana-enhanced rotary cannon spun up in the blink of an eye. The firing distance was exceptionally closer than before, as Berserker continued to descend. Saber finally realized she had

nowhere else to turn; she could no longer anticipate the initial velocity of the rounds, nor dodge the imminent rain of shells.

It's all or nothing . . .! Saber prepared her Noble Phantasm, misplaced though its use may be. But the instant she swung the sword over her head, streaks of shining steel flashed from an impossible angle, striking Berserker head on. Hammer, axe and bolt gouged the jet black armor, and a giant sickle cleaved the body of the revolving gun barrel in half. A flaming bolt hit the ammunication storage directly, igniting the remaining 20MM shells, which blossomed into wild crimson flames in the air. Berserker, covered by the fragments and the blast, was blown away helplessly, his trajectory tracing a parabola in the empty air before he sank into the river surface like a thrown rock.

Astounded, Saber turned around and, looking up, saw Archer standing haughtily on top of the arch of the Fuyuki Bridge. The shooting Noble Phantasms encircled him, surrounding him like an halo. He let out a wicked smile.

"Now, Saber, show it to me. I shall see for myself the true worth of your brilliance as a Heroic Spirit."

She did not need the encouragement. Saber replied Archer's insolent words with a silent glance, and once again returned her sight to the river surface, adjusting her stance with the golden sword. All obstacles had been cleared away. Now was the time of conclusion.

Kiritsugu, who witnessed Berserker's departure, was on a lifeboat already racing to the safety zone. He fired a flare at a spot in the empty sky. The hissing yellow phosphorus flame formed a

straight line between Saber's position and the ship he had abandoned.

"There! Right under it!"

Waver immediately saw the signal and yelled at Rider's herald beside him. Mithrenes disappeared without so much as a nod, returning to the bounded field where the king and his companions waited. The air around them shook, and the space which was earlier eroded by the thoughts of the Heroic Spirits now returned to its original form. An alien shadow covered the night sky like a mirage, then its real form emerged in an instant; the gigantic, ominous body fell into the water, right underneath Kiritsugu's flare. The raging sheets of water, thrown up by impact of the gigantic mass, assaulted the river bank like a tsunami. But not a single splash touched Saber—the prana gushing out from her right now summoned a surging wind so pressurized that it brushed aside the wall of water.

At the same time, Rider's chariot, Gordius Wheel, also leapt into the dim night sky. Its scarred surface told of the intense battle which had played out inside the Reality Marble, but its majesty and the awe its flying form inspired was not at all diminished.

"—Seriously! Just what took all of you so long . . . Woah!?" Rider saw the concentrated light pulsing from Saber's sword mid-complaint, understood at once, and urgently turned aside, escaping the area under threat. Caster's sea demon could not dodge it so dexterously; the giant throbbing meat lump could do nothing but attempt to scare this unknown brilliance with its shrieks.

The moment was ripe. Pouring all the strength in her body into the two arms grasping the hilt tightly, the King of Knights lifted the golden sword up high. Light gathered. As though upholding its sacred duty, the light condensed further, merging into a blinding brilliance. At the fierceness and purity of this beam of light, no words were spoken. The gallant figure of a knight once again shone the light of purification upon a battle-ravaged world, a darkness blacker than night. Unyielding for a decade, undefeated in twelve battles; these historical, peerless feats of arms and this glory were eternal and time-transcending.

This shining sword was the nostalgic, sorrowful, and exalted dream of all warriors past, present and future who stood at the brink of death on the battlefield—the crystallization of glory.

Seeing their faith to the end, the king of eternal victory now uplifted this will, and loudly declared the true name of the miracle she held in her hands.

"Excalibur!"

The light roared. Prana, accelerated by the released dragon factor, became a streak of light, a swirling and surging torrent that devoured the sea demon together with the dark night. A silent scream rose from the evaporating river water as every single atom of the giant sea demon—once the embodiment of terror—was exposed to the scorching impact.

In the center of the sea demon being burnt to cinders, Caster wordlessly watched this moment of white blinding annihilation which had stolen his heart.

"... O, Oh ..."

Yes—it was unmistakeably a light he had once seen in the distant past. Had he not once been a knight who pursued and rode after this light? The recollection, vivid and utterly unclouded, brought Gilles back to the distant past.

It was the light that shone through the stained-glass windows of the great cathedral, at the long-awaited coronation ceremony of King Charles. It was a white brilliance, a blessing of joy that wrapped around Jeanne and Gilles, who had attended as saviors and national heroes, together with the ars nova melody.

Aah, there was no mistake. it was this light. He could still remember it. Even now, after his fall into brutality, his body smeared by corruption, the memories of that day had not faded at all, and remained carved in his heart.

Even if his end was stained with humiliation and revulsion, no matter how much he may be held in contempt, the glory of his past could not be denied or overturned, for it was in his heart; not even God or Fate could take it away or violate it.

Gilles de Rais was dumbstruck by the clarity of his falling tears. What was he confused about? Had he lost sight of something? If he could just look back and admit it—would that not be enough?

"Just what have I ..."

Before the murmur left his mouth, all matter was brought into another world, annihilated by the white light.

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Archer, watching the sight from the high arch of the bridge, could not help the smile emerging on his face.

"Do you see it, King of Conquerors? This is Saber's light."

Archer addressed the empty space beside him. Rider, who had just experienced a merciless fight, was letting the chariot pulled by divine bulls remain still in the air, gazing dazedly at the peerless light of Excalibur.

"Will you still not acknowledge her, having witnessed this ray of light?"

Rider snorted, dismissing Archer's question. However, on his face were neither spite nor mockery, but solemnity, befitting a sight of tragic grandeur.

"It was indeed because she took upon her shoulders the hope of every man that she's able to display such might—it is painful precisely because it is so blindingly brilliant. Who could have thought that one who carried such a heavy burden was only a little girl who liked to dream?"

On the river surface, Saber's slender body was huffing painfully from the intensive death battle which had just ended. Rider only knew what kind of weight had been piled upon her young and delicate shoulders during last night's quiz. For him, of open and straightforward personality, this way of living was absolutely unforgivable.

"Such a girl is truly the final result of one who has discarded youthful romance, dreams, and love, and sunk into the eternal curse of ideals. It is truly painful and unbearable to look upon."

"This is exactly what's lovely about her, isn't it?" In contrast to the King of Conqueror's melancholic expression, the golden

Servant's smile was immeasurably obscene, belying his dirty desires. "The overly mighty ideal she harbored within her ultimately burned her to ashes. The tears she would shed at her final moment . . . I imagine they would be very sweet to taste."

Complacently, Archer was letting his imagination run wild. With a flick of his eyes, Rider gave him a look of enmity.

". . . It seems I still can't bring myself to like you, Babylonian King of Heroes."

"Oh? Did you just realize that?" This title made the sparkling golden Heroic Spirit burst fully into a smile. "What do you plan to do, Rider? Resort to brute force now and unleash your anger?"

"Although that would be quite a joy, my strength tonight would not serve my feelings against an opponent like you." Speaking the straightforward truth without exaggeration, he tossed another scornful look at Archer: "Of course, if you would not let the chance pass, this king would gladly do so anytime."

"No matter. I will permit your escape, King of Conquerors. Defeating you short of your full strength would not satisfy me."

Hearing this self-possessed declaration from Archer, Rider lifted his eyebrows jestfully. "Hmm? Hahaha! Despite your words, your wounds from being sunk by Blackie have not properly healed either, have they?"

". . . All who provoke the king will repent their sin with death!"

Seeing the reactions from the others, and the bloodlust in Archer's red irises, Rider tightened the reins of the divine bulls with a smile and increased the distance between them. "Decide the victor next time, King of Heroes. The owner of the Holy Grail, I imagine, would perhaps be decided by the outcome of our battle."

Rider still firmly believed the only ones worthy of the Grail were Heroic Spirits on the level of 'Kings'—namely, the King of Conquerors and the King of Heroes. Smiling fearlessly, he left the arch of the bridge, galloping toward the river bank where his Master was.

"How will this end? . . . Rider, I have not decided if you're the only one worthy to be granted the ultimate treasure." Archer, muttering to himself, had another Heroic Spirit in his heart. His interest was focused entirely on her. Tonight, having witnessed that incomparable light, the thoughts of the primeval Heroic Spirit were drawn to the distant past.

—There was once a man. A foolish and ridiculous fellow, with a body of mud and soil, who set his heart on standing shoulder to shoulder with gods. His hubris and disrespectful arrogance offended the gods in heaven. He suffered divine retribution and lost his life.

Even to this day, the King of Heroes could not forget the way his manner of passing—with streaming tears on his face. *Why are you crying?* The King of Heroes had asked. Do you now regret having taken my side?

It is not that—he had answered. "Who would be there to understand you after I die? Who else would march by your side? My friend . . . when I think that you are henceforth to live on, all alone, I cannot help but shed these tears . . ."

As he watched the man take his last breath, the incomparable king realized: the way this man—human, but seeking to surpass

humanity—had lived, was far more precious and brilliant than the treasures he had collected.

"You fool, stretching for realms above men . . . There is only one person in heaven or earth worthy of appreciating your destruction. That is I, Gilgamesh. Sink into my embrace, oh you glorious and illusionary men! I have decided thus."

The golden majestic brilliance disappeared into the night mist, leaving the echo of evil laughter.

Act 11

– 84:15:32

On a faraway rooftop in the middle of Shinto, Sola observed as the giant sea monster was swallowed by a blinding white light, and gradually disappeared in the night fog. Her vision obscured by that fog, she could not follow the progress of the fight from such a distance with her naked eyes. She had not prepared any familiars for scouting, and had no choice but to gaze at the riverbank where a giant sea monster danced wildly with fighter jets, while she danced with these concerns in her head. The first stage of the battle was over, but the Command Seals on her right hand were still there. Lancer was still in the battle with good health.

"Thank God . . ." Though she was buffeted by strong gusts of wind on the high windswept place, Sola was relieved for the moment. Lancer would probably return with good news soon. If his victory was shared with other Servants, the other Masters would also receive additional Command Seals, but that was trivial. Right now, she was happy just to have regained the three marks of the Command Seals binding her to her Servant.

Had the howling wind been absent, Sola might have sensed the presence of the attacker sneaking up to her back from the stairs. Preoccupied with the other battlefield, she had let her guard down. Given her dismal knowledge of self-defense, let alone combat training, one could not have expected much more of her. Suddenly losing her footing, she ended up on the concrete floor face-up, without time to even grasp what had happened. Reflexively her right hand reached for help, but it was roughly grabbed by someone, clearly without intention to help. Instead, an excruciatingly painful blow struck her wrist.

"Aaa—!" From her fine and slender wrist, fresh blood gushed forth as from a broken tap. Sola stared in attentive disbelief—*her right hand was not there;* It had been cut off cleanly in one stroke. The fingers and nails she was so proud of, the result of careful manicuring, and the Command Seals, more valuable than anything else—they had disappeared from Sola's right arm. Above the pain and the chill from blood loss, a more desperate sense of loss dyed Sola's thoughts pitch black. Letting out a deranged scream, Sola crawled about on the floor, trying to find her missing right hand. *No! It'll be troublesome if I can't find* it. *I can't call Diarmuid. I won't be cared for by Diarmuid.* The missing Command Seals troubled her most; in the worst case, she would spend all the strokes on a single command—"Love me!"—and that should be enough to bind him. Even at the cost of her life, she would have to retrieve those Command Seals . . .

Nonetheless, however hard she searched the cold concrete floor, she found only her own splattered blood. But the tips of a pair of boots, indifferent and unmoving, could now be seen. Lying

prostrate on the floor, her vision blurring from heavy loss of blood, Sola looked up and saw an unfamiliar raven-haired lady. She looked down at Sola, who was on the verge of fainting, no hint of emotion or pity on her face.

"Hand . . . My . . . hand . . ." With her remaining left hand, she grabbed the boot, clung on to it, and fell unconscious.

Without hesitation, Hisau Maiya tossed away the female magus' right hand, which she had forcefully severed with a survival knife. With the right techniques, the engraved Command Seals on her wrist could probably be recovered, but Maiya did not have such methods at her disposal; the arm was as good as useless. She quickly applied a torniquet to the wrist to prevent further blood loss, lifted the unconscious target onto her shoulder, and with her other hand, dialed Emiya Kiritsugu's number on her mobile phone.

"What's the matter, Maiya?"

"I have secured Sola Nuada-Re Sophia-Ri at Shinto. The Command Seals were cut off along with her right hand, but her condition is not critical."

"Okay. Leave quickly; Lancer would probably return soon."

"Roger."

The threadbare conversation done with, Maiya hung up and dashed down the stairs quickly to the lower floor. The homunculus rib transplanted by Irisviel still throbbed with a dull pain as it slowly acclimatized itself to her body, but her movement was not hampered by it. She had managed to trail Lancer and his

new Master, and grasped a golden opportunity to capture Sola during Lancer's absence.

Kiritsugu's conjecture was spot on, but he still viewed Kayneth as the target of annihilation. Kiritsugu's policy was to be cautious against those chosen as Masters, even if they had lost their Command Seals. His real intention in capturing Sola alive was to question her on Kayneth's hiding place. The interrogation would certainly be a cruel experience for Sola, but the thought earned no sympathy or mercy from her; cruelty was not uncommon in battles between men.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The tranquility of Shinto's late streets seemed far away, as ambulance and patrol cars traveled back and forth continually. A tall man in priestly garments walked alone on the footpath late at night. It would have been suspicious under normal circumstances, but tonight the peacekeepers were virtually worked to death by successive requests for help and instructions for blockades; there was no time to worry about an ordinary pedestrian. Not a single patrol car which passed Kotomine Kirei paid any attention to him.

Kirei was silently hurrying back to Fuyuki Church, a deep thought caught within his mind. He spared no thought at all for the chaos of the city from which mayhem had yet to subside. Always faithful to instruction, obedient to responsibility, strict with ethics—Kirei had strived hard until today. His conduct was always beyond doubt. Hence, this was the first time he was

perplexed by his inability to surmise the meaning behind his actions.

Previously, Kirei would rush to Tousaka Tokiomi's fights with the intention of providing backup for his mentor, but when the opponent was Matou Kariya, Kirei chose to hide in the shadows; an action tantamount to sabotage. Certainly, he knew the difference in strength between Tokiomi and Kariya, and the situation rendered assistance meaningless in the first place. Mere spectating would still be in line with his principles, but his subsequent actions deviated from his duty completely.

Having felled Kariya from the apartment rooftop, Tokiomi assumed complete victory without even checking his enemy's corpse. Half-shocked by his mentor's audacity, Kirei found Kariya lying prostrate in the back alley not long after, still breathing. As Tousaka's hound, it was his duty to deliver the final blow swiftly. But Kirei's mind was occupied by his morning conversation with Archer. To understand not just Emiya Kiritsugu, but himself as well—no, to understand himself first—he should observe Matou Kariya's fate. Such was the advice given to him. It had been an unpleasant conversation, a jest not worth his time. But with Tokiomi and Kariya's showdown before him, what had made him decide to spectate? He had no need to stay if assistance was unnecessary; should he not have sought out the other Masters instead?

When Tokiomi's flames caught Kariya ... Did he not feel dejection? Before he realized it, Kirei was administering curative magecraft to Kariya's body. Carrying Kariya, sound asleep but in stable condition, he left the battlefield, depositing him in front of

the Matou residence, then concealed himself from public gaze. That had taken place about fifteen minutes ago. The Command Seals were still on Kariya's hand. Kirei did not watch the battle at Mion River to the end, but whatever the injuries inflicted, Berserker still seemed to be alive.

Covering the long distance from Miyama Town to the Shinto outskirts at a leisurely pace—a journey which passed through Fuyuki City—Kirei was still distressed by the unanswered question—Why had he done such a thing? This was of a different nature from his wine-hoarding; that was a hobby not completely bereft of benefits. Prior to this, Kirei had done things in secret without Tokiomi's permission, and had given false reports at times, but these were not direct obstacles for Tokiomi—his hope of a confrontation with Emiya Kiritsugu did not conflict with Tokiomi's possession of the Holy Grail. But his prolonging of Matou Kariya's life, the life of Tokiomi's nemesis, was an inexcusable act of treason which made him Tokiomi's foe. In his purposeless state, he had perpetrated something preposterous. Tonight, Kirei had clearly crossed the line as a loyal servant of Tokiomi.

Though conscious of the gravity of his actions, he felt not a tinge of regret within his heart, but inexplicable exhilaration instead. Archer . . . had he been tricked by the cunning King of Heroes? His mind felt wearier than his feet. Kirei suddenly had a rare notion of talking to his father Risei. While he was honest with Kirei in all every respect, he was a father who would never be able to understand Kirei's worries. Nevertheless, come to think of it, did Kirei not have a heart to heart talk with his father before?

Even if he would disappoint his father deeply, if he could speak his mind without fear, his relationship with his father would definitely change—that would provide Kirei with something completely new. With this vague anticipation in his heart, he shelved his worry for the time being and continued walking into the night.

– 82:09:51

To Father Risei, supervisor of the fourth Heaven's Feel, this had been an extremely tiring night. This was the second time he had assumed the office of supervisor of the Heaven's Feel, but he had never dreamed that such a difficult situation would arise.

The series of problems that had arisen had escalated to a very large scale. To eliminate the evidence, both the Holy Church and the Magi's Association were acting in secret. It was a dire state; rather than quarrelling among themselves and defining their respective spheres of influence, they should focus on pick up the pieces.

"The strange incidents near the Mion River have been attributed to poisonous gases produced by the chemical reactions of industrial waste"—such a report *could* deceive the public temporarily. The patrolling media truck constantly broadcasted warnings of hallucinations from inhaling toxic fumes, and urged those living along the shore to check into a hospital for treatment. Of course, the hospitals which could diagnose patients at night had already been infiltrated by magi and Executors skilled in brainwashing through the power of suggestion; they were currently awaiting orders anxiously. It should thus be possible to eliminate the majority of witness statements, but not the source of rumors.

The purchase of two F15 fighter machines from Middle Eastern weapon merchants had just been completed, with Clock Tower as a middleman. Though it was a second-hand C-model,

there was no time to take this into account under the urgent conditions. The two F15s, on which the flag of Japan had been temporarily painted, would be delivered to the fortified air base; all that was left was to take the opportunity to exchange incompatible parts, and then assemble the J-model fighter plane. The Japanese Self Defence Force was already restless about its budget. A fighter plane costed over a billion yen, and it now had to wipe a scandal involving the loss of two fighters. They could only use prepared replacement fighters for negotiations, relying on the Self Defence Force to handle the responsibility of destroying evidence as well.

It was already late at night when the endless telephone negotiations finally ceased and he could rest for a while, but Risei immediately remembered the guest waiting in the main hall. Sighing, he pulled over a chair and began his work anew, executing his duties as supervisor.

"I am truly sorry to have made you wait. I have been rather busy tonight." In Risei's voice there was an exhaustion that could not be hidden.

From the dimly lit pews came the sound of somewhat artificial laughter. "It was unavoidable. You had urgent matters to attend to." A light, metallic squeaking sound of wheelchair wheels followed the laughter, and a seated silhouette emerged from the darkness. The sillhouette, so wan it seemed like a completely different person, could not even stand; it was the once-famous prodigy, Kayneth El-Melloi. Who, among those in the know about his past circumstances, could have thought he would be reduced to such a state? But in his eyes was a strong willpower, arising from

obsession, from which the stubborn, intolerant personality of the former prodigy magus could be vaguely perceived.

Although Kayneth's physical injuries made it impossible to regain his past glory, he had at least retained the use of his hands via the El-Melloi clan's contacts. An astonishing sum of money had been transferred to a doll-maker residing in Japan. Now, he could move freely within the range of movement allowed by the wheelchair, albeit with great difficulty. His left little finger, covered in a thick layer of plaster, had also regained its sense of pain.

"Father, regarding my application . . . what is the outcome?"

Despite the solicitous smile on his face, Kayneth's voice carried a threatening undertone, of the sort that a drug addict on the verge of withdrawal would demand drugs with. Risei gazed steadily at the face of this former magecraft prodigy; his face showed paranoia and confusion which could not be concealed.

Risei had not hoped for things to reach such a state, but it was ultimately a contract after all. Setting aside consideration of the secret alliance with Tousaka for the moment, he now had to practise what he preached, to preserve the Church's honor.

"Indeed, in the crusade against Caster, the Servant Lancer played an important role. This has also been verified in the supervisor's report."

"So there is no doubt that I am eligible to receive a Command Seal?"

"If you put it that way . . ." Father Risei furrowed his brow and glanced at Kayneth, thinking inconceivable thoughts in his mind. "Of course, in accordance with the agreement, it is necessary to

give Lancer's Master a fitting reward. Mr. Kayneth, do you think I can regard you as a Master?"

A look of hatred flashed in Kayneth's eyes, but his demeanor immediately recovered to gentlemanly standards. "Regarding the contract with Lancer, I established it to be jointly borne by me and Sola, my fiancée. I certainly do not have the intention of proclaiming myself a Master. The two of us, Sola and I, are one Master."

"But now, are not the supply of prana and the management of Command Seals both undertaken by Miss Sola alone?"

Kayneth's grimace could barely pass as a gracious smile. "The Command Seals have been entrusted to Sola for safekeeping, for *strategic considerations*. But ownership of the contract with Lancer is still mine. If you are suspicious, seek your confirmation from Lancer. Most importantly, the signature on the application submitted to the Church is mine alone."

Father Risei sighed. Even if he were to dig into the matter, making objections on trivial grounds, it would be meaningless. The true source of Risei's headache was this unexpected situation of having to give Command Seals to any Master other than Tokiomi Tousaka. Even if he refused to give the Command Seal to Kayneth, he would not be able to avoid rewarding them to his fiancée instead. Interfering in the internal conflict of the Archibalds was of no benefit to him.

"All right. I acknowledge your status as a Master. Sir Kayneth, please hold out your hand." With practised strokes, Risei traced the faded marks on Kayneth's outstretched right hand, transferring one of the Command Seals accumulated on his right

wrist to Kayneth's hand. It was painless; the entire process was concluded in just a few minutes.

"Then, please continue to fight glorious battles as a Master—"

"That is most certain."

Kayneth nodded with a smile, then took out a handgun hidden in the seat of his wheelchair and aimed at the priest, who had already turned away. The dry report of a gun broke the silence of the House of God. He did not even spare another glance for the old priest, slumped at his spot, instead staring transfixed at the imprint of the Command Seal carved on the back of his right hand. The situation had reached such a low point, and he only had one . . . against opponents who had not used their Command Seals, he was already disadvantaged. Saber's and Rider's Masters had already obtained their new Command Seals; that could not be ignored. The assassination of the supervisor would undoubtedly cause a stir, but in this Heaven's Feel, there were other magi who favored the use of small firearms; the primary suspect would be the filthy rat employed by the Einsberns.

Immersed in the ecstasy of regaining his status as a Master, Kayneth could not suppress the satisfied laugh that flooded forth from his throat. The assassination of the supervisor trampled the dignity and pride of Lord El-Melloi, but he had no intention of self-reproach.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Stepping into the chapel, Kirei immediately felt the presence of death. In the air hung a faint stench of blood, and the residual,

fainter odor of smoke. Someone had committed an unforgivably wicked deed in this House of God. Though he sensed no danger, Kirei stepped carefully, passing through the pews, and upon arriving at the altar, discovered the sillhouette lying at the side.

"Father—" The cry that rose from his lips was weak. The moment he spotted Father Risei's silhouette, his trained and keenly observant Executor eyes had noticed the bullet hole in his back and the pool of blood on the ground. Kirei, in complete mental torpor, carefully examined the corpse. He pulled up the right sleeve, checking the number of the Command Seals his father had managed. There was indeed one less Seal; Risei had given one of the Command Seals to someone, and had presumably been murdered by this person soon after. One of the Masters who had won merit in the crusade against Caster had been unwilling to share the credit with the others he had fought alongside, and committed such a crime. Such a sequence of events required no analysis.

But even a magus could not seize all the Command Seals from the hands of the dead elderly priest. The Command Seals managed by the supervisor were protected by holy prayers; without his permission, it was impossible to seize them through the use of thaumaturgy. Father Risei, the only one who knew the secret holy words, was already dead; the Command Seals of previous Grail Wars preserved to this day could no longer be used.

That is not right; would Father Risei have permitted such a thing to happen? Kirei lifted his father's right hand, discovering the unnatural bloodstains on the fingertips. They seemed to be marks made by abrasion. Risei, immersing his finger in the pool of

blood, must have left clues somewhere while on the verge of death. With this deduction, it was relatively easy to find the words in blood. On the floor, the final will, traced in reddish black, was "JN424"; one who was not of Christian faith might have thought this to be a secret message. But to Kirei, who had inherited Risei's pious faith, the significance of this cipher was obvious.

John 4:24. Without missing a word, Kirei recited the holy words from memory. "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth—"

As if in response, on the clammy right wrist of Father Risei, the Command Seals simultaneously gave off a faint light. With an accompanying a burst of dull pain, the Command Seals were transferred one by one onto Kirei's arm. Speechless, Kirei stared at the light of the Command Seals. Undoubtedly, that was the faith the father had entrusted to his son. Father Risei had believed that the first person to discover his corpse would definitely be his son. That was the only explanation for the code he left, a code that only one of the clergy could understand. He had entrusted all the important duties of the supervisor—managing the Command Seals, guarding the Grail, guiding Heaven's Feel in the right direction—to his son. Until death, he had truly believed that his son was one who could bear those responsibilities.

He did not know that Kirei had concealed his newly-obtained Command Seals, and had already gained the right to be a Master. He did not know that his son had, on an impulse, sown the seeds of disaster for his benefactor Tokiomi—

"—!"

Suddenly feeling tears falling from his cheeks, Kirei pressed his hands to his face, stunned. Shedding tears at the sight of the corpse of one's father, and at inheriting his will, was natural to a normal person. Instead, Kirei was mired in terror and confusion, as one falling into the abyss of hell.

He had to face all this with his face upheld—an authoritative voice in his heart spoke thus. _You must understand, and accept, these feelings flooding up in your heart. That is because . . .

—Tears. When was the last time he had shed tears? He still remembered clearly—three years ago. Scooping up the falling tears in her hand, she had once said: "You love me."—His heart, attempting to hide from itself was blocking his recollection. He could not turn back. He could not reflect. The tears he shed that day, the feelings he felt that time, needed to be tossed back into the abyss of forgetting.

The answer he had once understood, the truth he had painstakingly come to realize—was he able to stay this way because he avoided facing it with an open heart? He could not comprehend these tears at all. The old feelings were crying out, seeking understanding . . . from sentiments that had been sealed away. Still, heedless of these rational warnings, memories continued to seep forth from the gaps between the seals.

I had ended up so far from what I expected.

At the frail, dying woman's bedside, had he not come to realize the desire of his consciousness?

Wanting to ***** this woman—

Wanting to see this woman even more *****—

This woman did share something in common with his father, in the way they both deeply loved and trusted Kirei. In that same way, they also misunderstood his nature. For that reason, in the last three years, Kirei constantly prayed—

—That in the moments before his father's death, he would once again taste the joy of the mortal world's greatest *****—

"—*Like a bloodthirsty beast, the soul pursues pleasure*—" The ruby eyes, lying latent in his heart, were quietly whispering, accompanied by that sinister laugh.

Pleasure is the soul's only form—had he not said that? This, too, was Kotomine Kirei's nature—

"O Lord . . . hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is done on heaven." The familiar prayer he had to recite every day spewed forth from his mouth, perhaps from an instinct of self-preservation. And thus he returned as a clergyman, tightly binding a soul falling to pieces. "—Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen."

He sealed the cursed truth of the falling tears to the opposite shore of forgetfulness. Kirei prayed for his father's fortunes in the next life, and crossed his chest.

– 72:43:28

"You—! Useless fellow! Boastful trash!"

Lancer could only quietly lower his head and silently endure the ferocious scolding.

"You had only to protect a woman temporarily. But you could not even do it! This is preposterous! So this is what a so-called knight is made of!"

Kayneth was cursing, his spit flying everywhere. But compared to Lancer, who merely forgot himself out of shame, Kayneth was even more out of sorts, apparent from his disconcertment. His stubborn personality filled his anger with a righteous indignation that was fear-inducing. He had obtained a new Command Seal, and thus satisfied, had returned to the abandoned factory, only to find no sign of Sola, though she should have already ended the battle against Caster and returned. He had waited in a state of anxiety . . . until Lancer returned alone with a sombre expression.

"Though it was only a temporary substitution, Sola was undoubtedly your Master, was she not?! If you did not have the ability to guard her, why did you become a Servant? How could you be so shameless as to return alone!"

". . . I truly do not have the dignity to return."

"Then you—in the battle against Caster, did your foolish childishness also encourage you to neglect the protection of your Master, and focus on foolish displays of heroism?!"

Lancer weakly shook his head. His natural beauty was twisted by sorrow, belying his remorse for this hateful outcome. But Kayneth took no notice.

"Master, please allow me . . . Because Madam Sola and I did not make an official contract, we could not even feel each other's presence—"

"That is why you should have been even more careful and attentive!" Kayneth immediately shouted, cutting off his Servant's explanation.

A Master and Servant pair, bound by contract, would be able to sense if either had fallen into danger. In this way, Lancer was able to save Kayneth from his emergency in the Einsbern forest. But Lancer had not formed a thaumaturgically legal contract with Sola; he only protected Sola out of his duty to Kayneth, and this had caused a disaster. By the time Lancer had ended the battle and returned to the rooftop of the building in central Fuyuki, Sola had long disappeared. Only the bloodstains splattered on the floor hinted at the severity of what had transpired.

The only thing that could be confirmed was that Sola was still alive; the prana supply which maintained Lancer's existence and gave him strength to act still flowed unobstructed into his body. Undoubtedly, she had been kidnapped, but the instigator did not seem to have intentions on her life.

Any other Servant would have been able to sense her approximate location by the path of prana supply. Unfortunately for Lancer, his contract was not the usual kind—the contractor and the supplier of prana were two different people. His ability to sense the supplier of prana was thus extremely weak, and he could

not tell if Sola was alive or dead. Without any leads, retrieving her was like searching for a needle in the haystack. In the end, he had returned alone.

"Ahah, Sola . . . indeed, I should not have passed the Command Seals to her. A magecraft battle would have overloaded her . . ."

"In not advising Mistress Sola otherwise, I am also responsible. But Mistress Sola made that decision purely because she wished that you, Sir Kayneth, could regain your standing. Therefore, please—"

Kayneth raised his eyes, clouded with jealousy, and stared at Lancer. "You have the gall to speak thus? Don't be a fool, Lancer! It must have been you who encouraged Sola."

"You . . . Why would you draw such a conclusion . . .?"

"Hmph, stop pretending! In the stories of your legend, you are well known for your womanizing and adultery. Were you not involuntarily intending to seduce your master's fiancée?"

Kneeling on the floor with his head lowered, Lancer's shoulders shook violently, almost dangerously.

"—Master, you will take back those words."

"Hmm, have I struck a nerve? Is your anger unbearable? Are you going to reveal the true face of your ferocity?" Kayneth continued to mock the Heroic Spirit who could barely control his own emotions. "You've finally slipped up. On one hand you swear eternal loyalty to me, speaking pretty words; on the other hand, driven by lust, you betray me. You always spoke of knighthood with a proud expression; do you think that would be enough to mislead me?"

"Sir Kayneth ... you ... why do you not understand my loyalty?!" Lancer sobbed, inquiring plaintively with quivering voice. "All I wished for was to defend the honor I have always had! I only wanted to participate with you in glorious battle! Master, why do you not understand the heart of a knight?!"

"Stop saying these insolent things, Servant!" Kayneth mercilessly snapped at Lancer's plea with a ruthless expression. In his heart, suspicion of and dissatisfaction with his Servant had passed breaking point. "Presumptuous puppet, you are only a Servant, a shadow bound to the real world by magecraft! The glory and pride you speak of is a trick that spirits attempt to confuse with. And you dare undertake the insolence of lecturing your Master; know the limits to your audacity!"

"__"

Lancer was speechless. Seeing his expression, Kayneth secretly felt a sadistic pleasure. Seizing the opportunity, he stretched his right hand, on which the Command Seals had once again appeared, toward Lancer; the prideful magus laughed loudly.

"If you are dissatisfied, withstand my Command Seals with that pride and honor you speak so highly of. Hmm, no match? This then is your true ability. The spirit and fortitude of which you speak are beneath mention in the presence of these Command Seals. Such is the real trick of puppets such as Servants."

"... Lord Kayneth ..."

Facing the mocking Kayneth, Lancer weakly lowered his head, unable to make any sort of rebuttal. The majesty he bore in brandishing the twin lances before warlords had long since vanished; there was no heroism in the weakly slumped shoulders,

nor in the unfocused eyes staring at the ground. At the miserable sight, Kayneth, venting all the grievances he had been accumulating, was finally satisfied. He had finally been able to establish his ideal Master—Servant relationship with this Heroic Spirit. He should have done this much earlier, maybe right after the summoning, striking down his pride like this. Perhaps the presumptuous Servant would have served him compliantly without other intentions then.

"—Master." Following a long silence, Lancer suddenly called to Kayneth in a cold voice.

"What is it? Have you anything left to say?"

"... That is not my intention. There appears to be something closing in on us. It sounds like an engine equipped with an automatic drive."

Kayneth's hearing, incomparable to a Servant's, did not hear anything. Any motorcar driving toward an abandoned factory near daybreak could not be merely passing by. He suddenly remembered that the concealment enchantments he had set up here initially were by now starting to wear out. He sneered at his fallen magus self, and quickly covered it with a dry smile.

"Lancer, destroy it immediately. Do not stay your hand."

"Understood." Lancer nodded, shifted into spirit form, and disappeared.

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Following directions which Irisviel gave from the front seat, the Mercedes-Benz 300SL, driven by Saber, had left Shinto, moved east, and reached a deserted area.

"Follow this road straight. There should be an abandoned factory on the left. There! ... It appears to be the stronghold of Lancer's group."

The location of the factory, as well as the route to it, had all been told to Irisviel by Kiritsugu over the phone. After the intense battle near the river, one could guess that Lancer, who had left the battlefield without a word, would probably have returned to his Master's side. Hearing that Kiritsugu's had received a report on Lancer's whereabouts, Saber proposed to act immediately.

"But ... are you all right? Wouldn't consecutive battles be a great burden to you?"

"There is no problem, Irisviel. On the other hand, I hope to be able to face off against Lancer tonight." Somberly announcing this, Saber glanced worriedly toward the passenger seat. "Rather, are *you* all right, Irisviel? You don't look too well right now."

Saber looked aside at Irisviel, and could see that her face was pale and bloodless; she was constantly wiping cold sweat from her forehead. She had been like this since they left the riverside. Though she was trying her best to hide it, it was obvious to anyone that she was exerting herself.

"Don't worry, Saber. As long as you are by my side ... Ah, look. That building. That should be it."

Back when the city had not yet become an emerging residential area, this place had probably been used for lumber milling, or similar activities. It had then been abandoned by developing

trends and forgotten by emergent flourishing streets, standing quietly in a small hilly area overgrown with lallang grass.

Slowly passing through the front door into empty ground, Saber switched off the engine. The surroundings were quiet; Irisviel, standing outside the car, warily eyed the surroundings, then nodded.

"—Indeed, there are traces of magecraft enchantments. But what is strange is that they do not seem to be carefully managed; they are already showing wear and tear."

"No. This is the place, Irisviel." Saber, getting out of the car a little later, asserted with a calm expression. The skilled swordswoman had long sensed the scent of battle. Indeed, proving Saber's declaration, a handsome figure holding a lance suddenly appeared.

"So you were able to find this place—it must not have been easy, Saber."

"After some investigation, I was informed by my . . . partner that this was your stronghold." She had almost said the word Master; the pause revealed a minute wave of emotion, of which she herself was unaware. In principle, it was for concealing the true identity of her Master, but more fundamentally, she did not wish to admit Kiritsugu as her Master.

Lancer's expression was grave, and quite different from usual; he hesitated a long time, as if choosing words in his mind, before asking his unannounced visitor: "Where is my master's fiancée? Saber, would you claim not to know this?"

Saber's and Irisviel's expressions both turned troubled; they looked at each other. "Should I know something about . . . what happened?"

"It's nothing. Pretend I never asked." Lancer sighed lengthily; a sign of relief more than disappointment. He had not intended to ask her this; to think *his* rival would resort to underhanded means like kidnapping a hostage—the very thought was detestable.

"Come to think of it, Saber, are you all right? I doubt you came here to chat with me. Did you not expend a lot of energy in the battle against Caster?"

"The other Servants are in the same situation." Saber glossed over the matter inconsequentially. It was indeed true that every Servant had expended a great deal of prana in the battle at the riverside. "I predicted that no one would initiate an attack tonight, instead taking the defensive stance—hence, there is no need to worry about our battle tonight being interrupted by the others."

Saber, her frame filled with a calm fighting spirit, stepped forward. Her small, slender body nonetheless evoked an impression of majesty; this aura, complemented by the splendid radiant armor of prana, emanated from her entire body.

"It is already almost dawn . . . There is still some time in the night; if we miss it, who knows when we will have such an opportunity to face off without worry! Let us make the fullest use of it. What do you think, Lancer?"

Lancer, handsome expression lost to the worries of his heart, finally smiled slightly. "Saber, only this pure fighting will of yours can bring a cool and refreshing wind to my heart now."

Saber had also been secretly surprised to see Lancer sans his usual majesty a while ago, but now his smile assured her that her worries had been unfounded; such a smile clearly did not require concern or worry of any kind. Only one who had overcome all difficulties, steadfast in their beliefs, could smile like that.

Lancer brandished the red lance, chasing away the worries and laments in his heart; the point was directed at Saber. Saber also released the Barrier of the Wind King, revealing the precious golden sword amid the whirlwind. Concealing its blade from Diarmuid's Gáe Dearg was pointless. This rival, from another time but coincidentally met in this world, was a Heroic Spirit worthy to receive the light of the sword in which her glory has accumulated.

The morning light was lucent, the sky a faint red; the fighting spirit condensed between the two Servants was silently and anxiously on the offensive. Any sensitive soul in the middle of the whirlpool would have been struck by great pain, perhaps severe enough to arrest the heart. Every cell in Irisviel's body shuddered with the anticipation of a lethal blow; even her blood circulation had stagnated.

Both heroes stepped forward, spirits soaring majestically in the sky, and the clashing sounds broke clear as ripping cloth. The two heroes, deprived of their duel for three days, were finally able to face off; an intense battle would surely ensue. In a sense, the setup was a re-enactment of the warehouse showdown, but their crossing swords were more intense now—fiercer, more direct, and more final; straight-on collision of strength against strength.

There was no need for evaluation or fakery. Lancer held only one lance right from the beginning; the blade of Saber's sword was

also completely revealed. Neither relied on deception; each was faster, and more imposing. Each move was immediately retaliated against, countered with full strength, edge of sword against point of lance, intense and white-hot. The holy sword entwined the demonic lance, weapons in direct opposition; sparks flew in dazzling array. Driven by superhuman strength, the clash of precious legendary artifacts surpassed the speed of sound and approached the speed of light, rendering observation meaningless. Divine skills were being pushed to their limits in this supreme contest.

After an uncountable number of exchanges, the lance and sword finally disengaged and separated.

"Saber, you—"

Lancer spoke, but was unable to continue, his face twisted in anguish and confusion. Tonight, Saber's swordplay had changed only slightly, but it was indeed lighter and somewhat held back; Lancer did not fail to notice this. She had not exerted any less strength, but her swordplay had changed. Saber held tightly onto her left thumb, tucking it into her palm without grasping her sword. The remaining four fingers were lightly wrapped around the handle, used only for support in its control; they exerted no effort in attack. She had initiated the encounter, but deliberately excluded her left hand from the fight, wielding her golden sword with only her right hand.

Of course, Lancer understood. In the battle against Caster, he had destroyed the cursed yellow lance, giving up the lead he had attained. Saber's pride would not settle for this concession; she had thus handicapped herself. This, then, was an act of true

chivalry. Though that concession was noble enough to inspire respect, Lancer was not pleased. If casting away Gáe Buidhe had caused her unnecessary concern and dampened her enthusiasm . . . He had hoped for a battle without regrets, a full frontal. If Saber were to hold back out of consideration, he could not be at ease.

"You trouble me with your misunderstanding, Lancer." Guessing at Lancer's thoughts, Saber shook her head sternly, but with a calm expression. "If I were to use my left hand, my shame would definitely slow my sword. Against your superb skills with the lance, this would be a fatal mistake."

"Saber . . ."

"So, Diarmuid, this is really the best strategy I use in order to put all my strength into bringing you down." Holding the sword with one hand was indeed a small bother; Saber lowered the sword slightly, and assumed her stance. Shining in her eyes was a singular, awe-inspiring, clear will to fight, without carelessness or hesitation.

To her, the extent of the injury to her left hand was of secondary importance in battle. The most important condition for victory was her unclouded fighting spirit and pure passion for battle. To sever that confusion, she would rather give up her left hand, relying on her greatest weapon—her personal pride. This was the King of Knights' greatest nobility.

Saber had undoubtedly resolved to fight to the death. She too wished to face off with Lancer to her heart's content. Understanding her intentions, Lancer felt something intense and liberating, like an electric jolt.

"Glory shines from within the sword of the King of Knights. It is truly great that I have been able to meet you."

They had anticipiated the same outcome. On a bridge only wide enough for a person, the one who took the first step must be respectfully followed by the one who steps back. Such was the battle of true worth, without worry, without distraction; where lance and sword were pushed to the limit for the lives at stake. On the corner of solemn lips hung a hint of a smile.

"I, Diarmuid ua Duibhne, head of the Knights Fianna, am come to claim victory!"

"And I, Arturia Pendragon, King of Britain, will contest that claim!"

They closed in, white blades clashing, sparks flying. In its midst, the joy of those who lived for battle shone brightly.

– 72:37:17

Kayneth hid deep inside the abandoned factory and gazed at the battle outside. Unlike the uncorrupt preparedness of the battling knights, his heart was boiling with anxiety. As long as the victor remained undecided, he would only get more fidgety by the second with those anxious feelings.

Why couldn't he win? Though Saber underestimated Lancer so much, why was Lancer's spear unable to strike her?

The answer became clear upon careful thought—Lancer must be far inferior to Saber. At this moment, he regretted not contracting the Heroic Spirit Alexander. It would not have turned out like this had he made the King of Conquerors his Servant as planned. His Holy Relic stolen at the crucial moment, he had to summon Diarmuid as an emergency substitute. As long as a first-rate, authentic Master like himself was present, those minor disadvantages could be amended even if the Heroic Spirit's rank were lowered. The Servant's lack would be compensated by his own talent; Lord El-Melloi did indeed have such a fearless attitude.

But right now, his Magic Circuits destroyed, Kayneth had long lost his previous confidence. To survive this war with his remaining Command Seal and an inferior Servant, he had to be even more prudent than before. Without a definite chance of victory, the right thing to do would be to escape immediately with the Master. Although he had not gotten round to asking how Lancer managed to lose Gáe Buidhe, the chances of victory against

Saber became even more elusive after her left hand had healed. This wasn't the time to be sticking to battles; Lancer should have other duties that need prioritizing. It would be impossible for Kayneth to search for and rescue Sola by himself in this state; he needed his Servant.

Just how stupid is that Lancer? Did he not realize the severity of such a situation? Fretting, Kayneth scratched his head. How great would it be if he could use a Command Seal right now! Why did he have to have only one Command Seal on his hand? It was such a pity for Sola to take away two Command Seals. If only she was able to trust Kayneth . . .

Kayneth's neck suddenly felt an unnatural flow of air. An ordinary piece of note paper fluttered to the floor beside him. Kayneth fixed his eyes on the concise words on it with a deadly gaze.

"If you do not wish your beloved to die, quietly look behind you."

Stunned, Kayneth's eyes widened, and he turned the wheelchair around. Deep inside the pitch-black factory husk, the beam from the skylight illuminated a single spot. The outlines of a woman, lying on the floor as if deep asleep, appeared in the cold and dim light. Kayneth would never mistake those features, even in such low lighting and at such a distance. Although the pain and haggardness on Sola's steel-grey face showed that something had evidently occurred, the strand of hair beside her mouth quivered as if blown by a breeze. She was breathing; she was still alive. Kayneth forgot the warning on the paper and almost cried out.

Then, like a wraith emerging out of the darkness, a human figure stepped into the weak light and showed himself.

An old coat, untidy hair, and listless whiskers; only a pair of eyes, belying the gloomy countenance, fierily emitted a razor-sharp light. It was that unforgettable man, the one who had cruelly torn apart all the Magic Circuits in Kayneth's body—that hateful flunky of the Einsberns. He had probably transported the unconscious Sola in from the back door quietly while Saber and Lancer were locked in combat. The barrel of the submachine gun in his hand was aimed steadily at Sola's forehead.

"It just has to be . . . that bastard . . ."

Kayneth had experienced that viper-like cruelty and seamless prudence first-hand. Over the anger and hatred, a deep, surpassing despair made him hang his head powerlessly. It really was the worst situation he could think of—the woman he loved, captured by the most difficult enemy he did not wish to imagine. The voice of reason interrupted his descent into panic. There must be some purpose in his deliberate appearance and showing of Sola's well-being.

Kayneth turned his head and cast a glance at Lancer, who was fighting with all he had in the abandoned empty area. Judging from their position in battle, Sola's location was a dead spot that they could not see. The two of them were both bent on tackling the enemy before them, completely ignorant to this new invader. Kayneth could not guess his intentions, and silently lowered his head in obedience.

The man took a roll of vellum out of his coat and tossed it open into the air. It was heavier than paper, but simple manipulation of

air was enough to make it fly with the wind. Like a jellyfish, the vellum floated across space slowly and leisurely, and landed on Kayneth's knees. Though the figures and well-made patterns were meaningless to others, Kayneth saw a perfect magecraft document written in a familiar format. But its contents were very rarely seen.

Binding magecraft: Target — Emiya Kiritsugu

The Crests of the Emiya family hereby command: Provided the following conditions are met, this oath shall become a commandment and bind the target without exception.

Oath: To the fifth head of the Emiya house, Kiritsugu, son of Noritaka: regarding both Kayneth El-Melloi Archibald and Sola-Ui Nuada-Re Sophia-Ri, all intentions and actions to kill and harm shall be forbidden for all eternity.

Conditions: . . . . . .

"...!"

A Self-Geis Scroll—one of the most merciless contract magecrafts, used only in the treacherous society of magi to form contracts of strict obedience. It was an enforced curse that forcibly truned the functions of one's own Magic Crests upon oneself. In theory, its power could not be erased by any method. If the caster lost his life, the Magic Crests would bind the soul of the dead man and would not be passed down the generations. It was a very dangerous magecraft. For magi, a parley involving such a declaration would in fact mean a maximal concession.

Though it was not something Kayneth saw often, it was indeed proper in the way it was written, with no loopholes. The signature made with the declarer's blood pulsed with prana; the spell was already established and in effect. When the conditions recorded in the bottom half of the declaration were met, that man, Emiya Kiritsugu, would give up a part of his free will, and the contract would be confirmed as an unbreakable curse.

Holding the vellum with shaking hands, Kayneth read the conditions of the contract over and over. As if hoping the contents would change upon reading, he stubbornly contemplated the words repeatedly. He bent his entire will to consider if the contents left any gaps for contradictions.

Despite these wavering thoughts, his logical self had already accepted his own yielding. The possibility of returning to his homeland with his beloved—was that not his greatest wish right now? If he hesitated any longer, Emiya Kiritsugu would probably pull the trigger and take Sola's life, then pointed the barrel at him. To lose everything, or regard that declaration as his last hope at life; that was the only choice he had.

With the dim and blank look of an empty shell, he looked at the final Command Seal on his right hand, and gave the final unbreakable command as Lancer's Master.

Without warning or reason, brilliant vermillion scattered over the earth, shocking all onlookers. Saber, Irisviel, and even Lancer himself widened their eyes at this abrupt end. Lancer's own shock was the most intense, since he had not a sliver of expectation or preparedness for that agony and despair.

Dazed, Lancer gazed at the crimson flowers that dripped from the red spear shaft to the ground. He could not believe it was his own blood. His own beloved spear had pierced his heart. His own two hands had forcibly stabbed the spear tip into his own body. Of course, it was neither his intention nor his wish. His crimson spear was supposed to pierce Saber's heart, and Saber's holy sword should have pierced his own heart.

To rob him of everything on a whim, disregarding his fighting spirit and beliefs—only Command Seals had such great power. Overly focused on the duel with Saber, Lancer had not noticed the treaty secretly sealed in the dim abandoned factory beside him until the fateful moment.

"Use up all the Command Seals and let the Servant finish himself." That was the condition required by the Self-Geis Scroll—a total retreat from the Holy Grail War.

"Ah. . ." Crimson tears flew from Lancer's wide eyes. It was the second time his lord had murdered him. Diarmuid ua Duibhne, bent on overcoming that unhappy end, wished so strongly to return to this world from the Throne of Heroes. But the end he got was a replay of that tragedy, a repeat of that despair and sorrow.

The Heroic Spirit looked behind him, eyes moist with blood and tears. Two Masters walked out of the abandoned factory to witness his end; Kayneth, sitting on his wheelchair with an empty and dazed expression, and another man who carried Sola's comatose body in his hands, the anonymous true Master of Saber he had seen at Einsbern castle.

"Do you . . . so . . ." Kneeling in a pool of his own blood, Lancer tried to speak, his voice coming out hoarse and low.

"Do you seek victory so much!? Do you want to win the Holy Grail so much? So much that you would . . . trample on my only wish . . . don't you feel ashamed!?"

His beautiful countenance, twisted by blood and tears, was now demonic. Lancer, forgetting everything but hatred, no longer distinguished between friend and foe. Thinking of Kiritsugu, Saber, and everything else, he roared a growl of vengeance that tore at his heart.

"Unforgivable . . . I'll never forgive you! You dead men slaved to fame, desecrating the glory of knights . . . let my blood stain that dream! I curse the Holy Grail! May your wishes become disasters! When you fall into the flaming pit of hell, do not forget this anger of Diarmuid's!"

As his material body crumpled like a hazy shade, he screamed curses until his final moment. There was no longer the glorious figure of a Heroic Spirit, only an evil spirit roaring with resentment. Lancer had been completely eliminated.

At a loss, Kayneth gazed at the blank space left by Lancer's disappearance. Casually, Kiritsugu placed Sola, who was still deep asleep, on his knees. As Kayneth softly caressed the haggard sleeping face of his beloved, he asked Kiritsugu with a weak voice.

". . . Your enforcement has been . . .?"

"Ahh, it's established. It's already impossible to kill you . . ." Kiritsugu slowly moved back as he took out a cigarette from his pocket and lit it—maybe that was the signal. "For me, that is."

While Kayneth mumbled in a low voice, Hisau Maiya, witnessing everything in the shadows far away, silently pulled the trigger of the Steyr AUG assault rifle. Kayneth and Sola, framed in the night vision scope, were mercilessly peppered by a deadly rain of automatic fire. Without Servants or Volumen Hydragyrum's protection, it was inescapable. The magus and his fiancée fell to the concrete ground, ripped like rag dolls. He only wondered if the magecraft of the Self-Geis Scroll had been tempered with, but had missed the hidden meaning of the important contract. That finally sealed the fate of the genius magus.

"Uuu . . . Ahhh!"

Sola, who died painlessly from the bullets, was the luckier one. Even when fallen from the wheelchair, peppered like a sieve, Kayneth still remained breathing. His many wounds were fatal, and he had no hope of survival. But those last few seconds of his life were a cruelly long time to endure the pain and agony of death.

". . . Ahhh . . . Kill . . . Kill me . . ."

"Sorry, that is a contract I can't fulfill."

Kiritsugu ignored the weak entreating sounds beside his feet, and replied with a nonchalant voice as he exhaled the purple smoke. The sound that sobbed with pain did not go on. Unable to keep watching, Saber ended his life mercifully with her sword. Ultimately, the King of Knights' sword had not fulfilled the promise with Lancer. It had ended up far from faith and glory, stained by blood from ending the pain of those hopeless ones.

"Emiya, Kiritsugu—"

The azure irises burned with a cold fire. These were not eyes for looking at friends, or even to face comrades. As when she faced Caster's madness and Archer's arrogance, it was a look, sharp as a blade, for piercing her enemies.

"I finally understand it now; you're a man without morals. Though our paths differ, I had thought that our goals were the same; I was far too naïve . . ."

Kiritsugu remained silent. There was no need to answer. The actions Saber had just witnessed were absolute evil.

"Up till now, I had believed Irisviel's words and never doubted your character. However, even if a man like you now says he'll save the world with the Holy Grail, I won't believe a word of it anymore. Answer me, Kiritsugu! Did you deceive even your wife? Just what is your true wish for the omnipotent wish-granting vessel?!"

Though Kiritsugu stared at Saber seemingly in irritation, the mouth which held a cigarette spoke not a word. He seemed to be looking at a wildly barking stray dog. The gaze harbored a decisive separation, speaking of minds which had given up trying to understand each other with words.

Within Saber's heart, there was already a calm and resolute decision, almost to the tune of 'he must be killed'. Perhaps the only end for her and this Master would be a face off. Even if it would be prohibited by the Command Seals, her enmity could not be changed. It was the largest fracture in their camp during this War of the Holy Grail. As long as she remained with Emiya Kiritsugu, it was likely that she would not be able to obtain the Holy Grail she wished.

"Even if I win the Holy Grail with my sword, if I were to entrust the Grail to you, then . . ." The sunset over Camlann flashed before her eyes. her heartfelt wish blurred her last words. A sound behind her interrupted that painful pause.

"Answer me, Kiritsugu. You have an obligation to." Even Irisviel, who trusted her husband completely, could not help but raise her voice in question. Unlike Saber, she fully understood her husband's thoughts. But there was a vast discrepancy between the beliefs expressed in words and the stunning actions before her eyes. A cold premonition had questioned 'could it be . . .?' when Lancer inquired about Lord El-Melloi's fiancée earlier. However, the conscience in her heart denied that possibility. For him to do something of that degree . . . Even as his wife, Irisviel had underestimated Kiritsugu's ruthlessness.

"That's right; this is the first time you witnessed my *modus operandi*, Iri." Breaking his silence, Kiritsugu answered drily. The cold and dim look he gave Saber shrank shyly with shame as he turned to Irisviel.

"No, Kiritsugu. I don't need your words. Give them to Saber. She needs to talk to you."

"No. I have nothing left to say to that Servant. There's nothing to be said to a killer manipulated by glory and honor." Fearlessly, he had insulted Saber while speaking to Irisviel. Saber would not leave it unanswered.

"Don't you dare humiliate chivalry in front of me, you beast!"

Facing the angry yells of the King of Knights, her brows in rage, Kiritsugu remained rock-steady, paying her no heed and fixing his gaze on his wife instead. But he finally spoke.

"Chivalry will not save the world. This was true in history, and will be true in the future. Some misguided ones promoted the idea of a difference between good and evil in the method of battle, and acted pridefully on the battlefield. You may think the heroes of those ages were cloaked with that illusion, but how many youths do you think were deceived by the glory of such courage, and finally bled to their deaths?"

"That is not an illusion! Even if it was life or death, if it is an act of humans, it must be bound by rules and beliefs which leave no room for violation. Righteousness must not be lost! Otherwise, the endless flames of war will once again turn this world into hell at the end!" Saber rebuked righteously. Kiritsugu snorted in derision.

"See, it is just as you said, Iri. This great Heroic Spirit dares to think the battlefield is better than hell. What a joke! In any era, the battlefield has always been veritable hell. In the battlefield, there is no place for hope. What lies there is only cold despair, and a sin called victory, built on the pain of the defeated. All who met there have wholeheartedly admitted the evil and foolishness of this act called war. As long as people refuse to repent and regard it as a taboo of evil, the world would remain in endless hell."

Saber, who only know the utterly cruel, emotionless Kiritsugu, now saw for the first time Emiya Kiritsugu's other side—a man on the verge of being crushed by endless anguish and sorrow, now delivering a monologue close to lamentation.

"However, no matter how high they piled their mountains of corpses, humans did not realize that truth. That's because in each era, the courageous and fearless great heroes always bedazzled the

multitudinous eyes with splendid heroic legends. The wistful actions of those idiots and their refusal to admit the evil of bloodshed has stalled the essence of humans at the Stone Age!"

The target of the rage filling those eyes was clear. Since the day the flames of war started in the land of Fuyuki, Kiritsugu had probably been looking at the shining figures of the Heroic Spirits before him, prided in courage and resolution, with unendurable rage in his heart. Those who left such heroism, and those who longed for such heroism; the anger directed at them with no outlet . . . a hatred of the idea of 'Heroic Spirits', created by the prayers of men.

"—then, Kiritsugu, your humiliation of Saber . . . was it because of your hatred of Heroic Spirits?"

"How could it be? I would never mix personal emotions into it. I need to win the Holy Grail and save the world. I am merely employing the most suitable method in fighting for that goal."

Had he fought as planned, killing Sola immediately instead of capturing her, Lancer would have disappeared as his prana supply was cut off. However, what Kiritsugu employed was a strategy that completely eliminated the possibility of a Servant forming a contract with a new Master and returning to the battlefield. From the outcome of the battle against Caster, he had predicted Kayneth's acquisition of extra Command Seals, and prepared such a twisted, complicated trap. Relying on the Command Seal of the rival Master to eliminate the Servant, and then taking out the Master, completely removing the obstacle . . . in that time, what he demanded from Saber was not to win against Lancer, but to distract his attention while Kiritsugu convinced Kayneth.

"The world being what it is, human nature being as it has always been, it is impossible to eliminate battles. Ultimately, killing is evil. It is best to end it with greatest efficiency and at the least cost, in the least time. If you would slander that as foul, and demean that as nasty, then do as you wish. Justice will not save the world. I have no interest in things like that."

Saber recalled Lancer's final, disappearing eyes filled with anger. Staring at the tragic remains of the man and woman collapsed in a pool of blood, and the expression of anguish carved on their faces, she spoke.

"Even so, you—" She found her own voice lower and calmer than she expected, and realized that her complicated emotions toward Kiritsugu had turned to some kind of pity. Perhaps he was a man to be pitied. Was it not the world, but he himself who needed salvation?

"Emiya Kiritsugu, I know not what kind of betrayal you were subjected to in the past, or why you despair so. But that rage, that lament, are undoubtedly of those who pursue justice. Kiritsugu, in your youth you should have wished to be a hero of justice. You should have believed in justice, and wanted to become a hero who saves the world, much more than anyone else—was that not so?"

Until now, the only attitude Kiritsugu had shown Saber was one of complete ignorance and cold scorn. Having heard Saber's quiet questioning, his eyes, fixed on his Servant, now flickered with other emotions for the first time. It was a rage seemingly close to boiling over.

The rumble of vehicle exhaust disturbed the silence of dawn. The small truck which Hisau Maiya drove entered the yard of the abandoned factory with its headlights on. She was here to take Kiritsugu back to Shinto after concluding her duty as sniper.

Taking his eyes off Saber, Kiritsugu walked toward the small truck without turning around, and opened the passenger side door. Saber continued talking to his back; there was something she had to say.

"Kiritsugu . . . do you understand this? If you commit evil out of your hatred of evil, the only thing left will be evil. The rage and hatred which sprout forth there will cause new wars once again."

Faced with Saber's heavy words, Kiritsugu started to turn around, about to reply—but changed his mind, and staring into empty space, he spoke.

"I will stop the endless cycle. That is what I need the Holy Grail for." His voice grew louder. "I will use this miracle to complete the revolution of this world, the revolution of all human souls. I will make the bloodshed in Fuyuki city the final bloodshed of all human beings. If I am to carry all the evils of this world, then let it be so. If that will save the world, I will gladly accept it."

Kiritsugu spoke the decision in his heart with such calmness and evenness that even Saber was speechless to reply. though his method and path were unendurably evil, his faith in seeking the Holy Grail was pure and selfless. If there was a Master in the war worthy of obtaining the Holy Grail, he would undoubtedly be Emiya Kiritsugu. Wordlessly, Saber watched the small truck depart. The first ray of dawn shone beside her, the dark night which turned Fuyuki into a demonic realm departed, and the

streets once again put on the mask of normality beneath the sunlight.

"Is Kiritsugu . . . gone already?"

"—Irisviel?"

Pondering the oddities in that question, she was unable to detect Irisviel's irregularity. That empty, wondering gaze, the pallid face, and the sweat pouring from her forehead in a stream . . . It took all her might pretending to be all right while she was beside her husband. Irisviel fainted as soon as she relaxed, collapsing like a puppet cut loose from her strings.

Saber immediately held her, but the strange heat radiating from the slender body in her arms made her realize Irisviel was already in critical condition.

"Irisviel!? Hang on!"

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From the resolute and bold way Emiya Kiritsugu so loudly declared his determination that morning, it was clear that they were truly words from his heart. But just what those incredibly ominous words meant at the end? Kiritsugu finally understood them a few days later. It would be a despair even deeper than despair, a regret even deeper than regret.

Act 12

– 65:49:08

Matou Kariya had fallen into a pitch-black dream. He could see nothing. He could hear nothing. Only his skin sensed the shockingly dense pressure of the darkness. Where is this place . . . ? It seemed to be inside someone's body. Kariya inquired of the darkness: "Who are you?"

As if with a suffocating pressure, the darkness rumbled low with the angry roar of stormy winds, the crash of the falling sky, and the cracking of the earth. "I am . . . the alienated; the ridiculed; the despised." The dense black shadow that moved within the darkness was like a human shape poised to attack.

Skull and bones were immersed in the pitch darkness. The pair of bright eyes were even more terrible than the darkness. This was Berserker, the manifestation of Matou Kariya's curse; no, the Servant his hatred had called from the ends of time.

"No need to praise my name; no need to envy my body; I am the shadow under the radiance of Heroic Spirits; Birthed of the darkness of glorious legend—"

Like a miasma that rose forth from underground, sighs of hatred wrapped around Kariya from every direction. He began to feel uneasy; just as he was about to turn his gaze, the icy touch of a metal gauntlet gradually neared, catching mercilessly on Kariya's clothes. Kariya's thin body was lifted into the air, before Berserker's eyes, and he could not but meet that crazed gaze.

"And so, I hate, I resent; nourished by the sighs of the people precipitated within the darkness, who curse the light—"

Kariya struggled against the gauntlets mercilessly locked around his throat, groaning in pain. In his eyes, there appeared another indistinct and confused scene. A sword gleaming bright, and holding its hilt, a radiant young warrior, no stranger—she was the Einsberns' Servant,Saber.

"This is my disgrace; Because of her unsullied glory, I must forever be belittled—" The Black Knight's helmet cracked apart. The face revealed was shrouded in darkness, but that pair of fiery eyes, and the teeth trembling from hunger, could be clearly seen.

"You are the sacrifice—" He pronounced coldly, embracing Kariya without another word, flashing sharp teeth coldly piercing into his jugular vein. Kariya screamed in agony to no avail. The berserk Black Knight sucked at the blood seeping from Kariya's throat, and swallowed heavily.

"Good, give me more; your blood and flesh, your life; let them ignite my hatred—!!"

No . . . Stop . . . Save me! Kariya used all the words he could think of to beg forgiveness, hoping for a helping hand, but in this darkness, salvation was not his to gain. A miasma of red flashed intermittently before his eyes, consciousness confounded by pain

and fear gradually becoming foggy. But he still found a last remaining bit of strength, and cried out in his loudest voice.

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Waking with a pained cry, he found himself still shrouded in darkness. The stench of rot pregnant in the ice-cold and damp air, as well as the hair-raising sound of thousands of worms crawling, told him clearly that this was, without question, the real world.

Between his dream and reality, Kariya could not tell which world seemed more merciful. At least, if he were able to forget that this body was about to die, perhaps remaining in the world of nightmares would be kinder. He could not understand the miracle which saved him, burned and falling from a rooftop, and returned him to the underground worm storage of the Matou residence alive.

His limbs felt dulled, but he knew that he was chained to a wall, his hands shackled. He could not stand on his own feet; his shoulders, supporting the weight of his entire body, hurt as if they were about to be torn from their sockets. But compared to the itch of the worms covering his body, it was not even worth mentioning. The worms licked at burnt skin, and under that skin was new, pink skin. It looked as if the burns were currently healing—though the reason was unknown.

It looked as if the Crest Worms intended to use Kariya's body as a seedbed to extend his life. But this was completely useless. In order to grow new skin, prana had already been forcibly consumed; the few days of life left in Kariya's body were also

about to dry up. He felt very clearly the ebbing of his strength with each inhaling and exhaling of breath. Very soon, he would die—

He understood that he was absolutely unable to put up any resistance. Aoi and Sakura's faces constantly flashed in his mind. He had once vowed to save them with his life as the price . . . but his wish had not been fulfilled. This disgrace and shame tortured Kariya's heart more than the pain of his body. Remembering the faces of the people he loved, then interrupted by the indifferent expression of Tousaka Tokiomi and the sneer of Matou Zouken, it pressed on him until he could not breathe.

"Bastard . . ." From the depths of his dry throat, Kariya cursed angrily with all the strength he had left. "Bastard . . . bastard, bastard . . ."

The sound of his sobs was suddenly muffled by a laugh of pleasure that came from behind him. The worms scurried to avoid the elderly and small silhouette, propped up by a crutch and slowly approaching Kariya. It was none other than the object of Kariya's hatred, Matou Zouken.

"Ah, Kariya, you really are quite pitiful like this."

The elderly magus used his crutch to poke at Kariya's jaw, forcing him to lift his head. Kariya no longer had the strength to rail at him, but nevertheless glared with hatred and murderous intent in his right eye. Just looking disdainfully at his opponent already exhausted him.

"Don't get me wrong—I'm not reprimanding you in any way. With such serious injuries, I'm surprised you came back here alive. Kariya, I don't know who it was that saved you. But your

luck in battle certainly does not seem lacking this time around." Zouken, murmuring gently to his 'son' as if caressing a cat, was in a particularly good mood today—thus the implication of evil was written all over his smiling face.

"Three Servants have already been taken care of; only four remain. Truth be told, I did not think you could actually hold out till now. It seems I may still have a chance of winning this gamble." Zouken suddenly finished speaking, retreating a few steps to distance himself from him. "Perhaps adding one more lock on you is not a bad idea. Ah Kariya, since things have come to this point, I will pass on to you the trump card I have secreted away for this day. Come—"

Zouken's crutch suddenly pushed at the hollow of Kariya's throat, forcing him to open his mouth. Immediately, it moved upward like a mouse, and was fiercely stabbed into Kariya's mouth.

"Ah, uu . . .!?"

Kariya fainted from the pain. The worms followed the cavity of his mouth and mercilessly invaded his gullet, finally arriving at the spasming abdomen. He could not vomit even if he wanted to. As though a red-hot block of metal had been placed in his stomach, an intense burning sensation grilled Kariya's body from inside.

"Uu . . . ah!?"

Kariya began to struggle in agony; the cuffs on his hands jangled. The blood which seemed to have stagnated now boiled, like a runaway, and his heart pounded madly, almost to breaking point. That had been a piece of concentrated prana. The Crest

Worms within Kariya's body, temporarily regaining vitality, began to move again. The mock prana circuits of Kariya's entire body started to pulse like never before, and his limbs were beginning to feel pain as if they were being torn apart—but this also meant that Kariya's numb arms and legs could feel again.

Seeing the trump card take effect, Zouken jeered loudly. "Huhuhuhu, this does bring instant results. Do you know? That piece of prana you swallowed just now came from a Lust Worm—the one which first absorbed Sakura's innocence. How about that, Kariya? The vitality of a young girl, absorbed continuously over the course of this past year—it is the best magecraft energy of all, yes?"

And perhaps it was this chain of cruel actions that satisfied his sadistic heart; the elderly magus turned around, still smiling. Before he left the worm storage, his derisive mockeries once again pierced into Kariya's ears.

"Go forth and fight, Kariya. Burn up completely the life snatched from Sakura. Do not be stingy with your blood and flesh, but bring back the Grail! If one like you can do it, that is."

After which, with the heavy closing of the doors, the surroundings were once again only filled with icy darkness and the noise of crawling worms. Kariya began sobbing silently.

– 64:21:13

The afternoon sunlight gently warmed the outer walls of the storeroom and gradually slanted its beams westwards. But the air in the storeroom remained silent and cold. A few rays of sunlight shone in from the small skylight, bathing the storeroom in the soft dusk of afternoon. Saber was sitting on the ground with her back against the wall, waiting for the arrival of that time. In the magic circle beside her was Irisviel, face-up with her hands crossed across her chest. She was still sound asleep. Saber had been gazing at her sleeping profile without moving ever since she brought her here this morning.

Would the magic circle that Irisviel and she drew together yesterday work as expected? For Irisviel, a homunculus, it appeared that resting in this magic circle is the only way of recovering. In the past, a ceremony would also be held with it. However, considering the current situation, it seemed to be a very distant and unreachable past.

It had been a long night. Caster, who hindered the battle and joined mid-way, was finally defeated. And the duel with Lancer had ended in heartrending fashion. The War of the Holy Grail had made great advancements last night, with two Servants exiting the battle. Saber could indeed be said to have played an extremely important part no matter what the situation of battle was.

She was tired—though her pride as a knight would not admit it—but right now she was more worried about Irisviel's situation. She recalled the signs she had noticed since morning. Irisviel had

called it a defect in the functions of a homunculus. However, Saber could not figure out just what had happened yesterday to make her body condition worsen so much. She had not been wounded, nor had she done any overly vigorous activity. Saber's tiredness or the increase in burden of prana supply was no explanation either; Irisviel was only a substitute Master.

The gentle sunlight shone in through the skylight. As it crept past noon, the sunlight also slowly changed its angle. Finally—Irisviel moved slightly. The still air wavered, ripples seemingly stirred within. Saber widened her eyes as Irisviel slowly sat up, moaning in anguish.

"... Saber ...?" Lazily brushing the silver strands of hair away from her eyes, she looked at Saber with a lost gaze.

"Irisviel, how are you doing?"

"... Umm, mm. I'm fine now."

That's impossible! Saber wanted to rebuke, but she saw that the reddish color of Irisviel's cheeks had returned to their normal healthy state. It's hard to believe that she had been in a coma until now. She gave a small stretch, as if joyfully waking up in the morning after a restful sleep.

"Looks like I've worried you."

"N-no. It'd be great if you're really fine ... but ..."

"I understand, Saber." With a bitter smile, Irisviel combed through her long hair with her hands, and smoothened her clothes, which had rumpled slightly. "Looks like I really did have a lot of problems after I came here. It should be fine if I just remain quietly like this, but—Saber, I may be unable to stay beside you and support you anymore."

"Irisviel . . ."

Irisviel's downcast manner surprised Saber a little instead. "Sorry. Although it's embarrassing, compared to becoming a burden—"

"No, that's not it. I hope you'll be more careful with your body. It's all my fault. This is like a reminder to me, for all the times I forced you to continuously participate in battles that you . . ." Saber stopped, afraid that what she may say next could hurt Irisviel. Irisviel smiled weakly, and said.

"You don't need to worry about that. We homunculi are different from humans, and we understand the structure of our body very clearly. It's like a car; if a car doesn't flash a warning light when the gas runs out, then that's a real malfunction."

Though the words were technically correct, the analogy was ill-fitting. Hearing this, Saber fell into silence with a gloomy face. Then with a serious gaze, she looked into Irisviel's eyes.

"Irisviel, though you are indeed a homunculus, I have never thought of treating you differently from humans. Therefore, please do not speak so lowly of yourself."

At Saber's straightforward rebuke, Irisviel conceded her defeat.

". . . Saber, you're so gentle."

"Everyone who got to know you would think this way. Irisviel, you're a very charismatic person." Saber jested lightly. "A woman has various discomforts. There's no need for you to be ashamed."

With that, even Irisviel gave a bitter smile of embarrassment.

"Speaking of that, Saber, you're also a girl—umm, wouldn't it be problematic? Having to act like a man during such times."

"No, about that—" Seeing Irisviel's face regain its usual smile, Saber relaxed, and her tone lightened even more than usual. "You wouldn't know it, but I had the extra protection of my Noble Phantasm when I was alive. Not only disease; even aging had stopped for me. Therefore, there was no discomfort for my body. I'd still be like I am right now even ten years later."

Suddenly noticing Irisviel's anxious expression, Saber quickly stopped. Although she could not understand how this casual topic had gotten Irisviel so melancholic, Saber discovered that Irisviel was in no mood to chat with her.

"—Anyway, Irisviel, there is no need for you to worry about anything. Indeed, I would be more relieved with you covering me, but there are not many enemies left now. I have complete confidence in attaining victory even when acting alone."

"... Saber, if you could truly act alone, I would not be worrying either."

Saber couldn't help but feel a bitterness welling up in her throat when she realized the true meaning of Irisviel's words. Yes, she wasn't acting alone. The Master who had made a contract with Saber was still on the same battlefield.

"Saber ... will you be able to fight beside Kiritsugu as a comrade?"

Her silence belied the struggles in the King of Knights' heart.

"... If all other Masters seek the Holy Grail for their own selfish desires, then I believe the Grail should be won by Kiritsugu. I have no objection becoming his sword for that." As she answered with a subdued tone, Saber furrowed her brows, unable to hide her distress. "—But I wish the only sword would

be me. I don't want to have to participate in Kiritsugu's methods again."

Her heart throbbed again, recalling the memory of Diarmuid's end. No matter how much she understood of the man Kiritsugu, no matter how many concessions she was willing to make, Saber could not forgive that barbarism. "Now, my battles must have Kiritsugu's full agreement. As a Servant, I can obtain victory without staining the Master's hands, can I not? The remaining three Servants cannot win against me."

Irisviel nodded; it was all she could do. It was a miracle that Saber could still muster such fighting spirit after witnessing Kiritsugu's despicable behavior. On the other hand, she also knew Saber's wish for Kiritsugu's trust, but she knew it was impossible. True victory for the Magus Killer and for the King of Knights differed as drastically as heaven and earth. Relying on her unyielding will to strive until victory was obtained, and on her perseverance which allowed her to stand no matter how many times she was defeated; a prudence that completely eliminated all possible cause for defeat—

Although their goals are both the same, their methods were critically different.

"For me, the Holy Grail is like myself. Because from the moment I was born, I have the vessel that allows its descent."

Hearing Irsiviel's words, Saber nodded. "I heard about it. Your duty is that of the guardian of the vessel."

However, though Saber was always with her, she still did not know how and where she had hidden the vessel of the Grail. Since they trusted each other, there was no need for her to ask. All

Saber had to do was to accept the vessel from her hands once she had obtained victory in all the battles.

"... Therefore, no matter what happens, I hope that my treasure would be passed into the hands of those I love—Kiritsugu, and you, Saber." Irisviel said as in prayer. Saber nodded resolutely.

"Back then, when I was first summoned, I already swore to protect you and obtain the final victory. I will not go back on that oath."

Irisviel could only smile and nod ambiguously.

If they were to fulfil the initial purpose of the Three Families of the Beginning—reaching Akasha—the Command Seals must be used to force Saber, who had defeated all the Servants, to kill herself, and use all seven Heroic Spirits as sacrifices for the Holy Grail to end the war. However, what Irisviel and Kiritsugu entrusted to the Grail was no such wish. Though the wish of ending all conflicts and changing the world seemed immense, it remained within the concept of miracles. The required changes would only happen within the world's limitations. It is really too easy compared to the goal of reaching the Radix, which is outside of this world. However, if they only wanted to fulfil a miracle in the physical world, the ancient Lady of Winter herself was not required as a vessel to completely awaken the Great Grail. Enough prana would be replenished for Kiritsugu and Saber to fulfil their wish as long as they defeat the other six enemy Servants.

However, Irisviel's concern lay not with the enemy's strength, but Kiritsugu and Saber's disagreement. Their beliefs and philosophy were complete opposites; conflict between them was

unavoidable. Irisviel believed she should do her best to lessen the conflict between them, but doing it was another matter entirely—actually, there was already no more hope. Her body was already —

"—? I feel a presence nearing, Irisviel." Saber's was now alert. Irisviel detected the guest with the bounded field established in the courtyard as well.

"—Ahh, don't worry. This is Maiya's presence."

With a soft knock, Hisau Maiya entered through the storeroom door. She had her usual cold and dispassionate expression, and her icy cold beauty made Saber move her eyes away with some displeasure. Judging from the way she mercilessly shot Lancer's two Masters dead, she was indeed only cruelly and loyally executing Kiritsugu's plans. However, Saber found it very hard to agree with such an action. It was unknown whether Maiya understood those inner thoughts of Saber's. As always, she did not greet them or mince her words, cutting into the main topic straight away.

"Tousaka Tokiomi sent a secret messenger. He got his familiar to bring a letter. Madam, it is for you."

"Secret messenger?"

After Irisviel's retrograde from Einsbern castle, Kiritsugu had turned it into a dangerous house of traps for unaware Masters. Maiya's bats were responsible for surveillance. Just then, a familiar, not a magus, had appeared there with documents.

"It was a jade bird. According to Kiritsugu's deductions, it should be a puppet habitually used by the Tousaka magi."

"That's what I heard too. Where's the letter?"

"Here."

Taking the note Maiya handed to her, Irisviel began to read. Pleasantries and formality had been omitted; the writer's intentions were written plainly and openly.

"... That is to say, he petitions for us to fight together."

Irisviel gave a snort of derision, and Saber likewise. The mere thought of his intentions annoyed her.

"An alliance? At this point?"

"Tousaka should feel very uneasy about dealing with the remaining Servants, Rider and Berserker. He thinks we're the easiest to deal with, and invited us into an alliance—we're being belittled here."

The letter's contents mentioned that Tokiomi would humbly await at Fuyuki Church at midnight if Irisviel was interested in a negotiation.

"As the Supervisor, the Holy Church should stay neutral. How did it agree to let him do this?"

"It appears the Supervisor, Father Risei, is already dead. The War of the Holy Grail is currently without a Supervisor."

Hearing Maiya's explanation, Irisviel nodded in agreement.

"Kiritsugu said this has exposed the relationship between Tousaka and the Church. The Supervisor, who supported him, had died, and he began to change his plans hurriedly."

"... Irisviel, the opponent is the magus who controls Archer. I feel he is not to be trusted." Remembering her disgust toward the golden Heroic Spirit, Saber concluded with caution. "I am in optimum condition now that my left hand has healed. I can single-

handedly defeat Rider and Berserker without any alliances. Of course, Archer is no exception."

Saber said, full of confidence. Irisviel nodded first, but then crossed her arms with concern.

"Although what Saber said is true, Tousaka has other things that can force us to concede. He has things we don't . . . such as certain sources of intelligence."

Maiya nodded upon hearing this. "Indeed. For example, if Tousaka can get information about the whereabouts of the headquarters of Rider's camp, it would be worth the risk to go into his trap and obtain this intelligence."

"—Is that still unknown? I didn't think a kid would pose such trouble for Kiritsugu."

"Rider and his Master are usually on their flying Noble Phantasm, and it is impossible to follow them on land. My bats are also unable to match their speed, so we can never catch them."

"Could they be even better than that Lord El-Melloi at hiding their trail?"

"Although it is surprising, we have checked all locations in Fuyuki where a magus may have set up camp, but we still have not found Rider and his Master."

Like Maiya said, what troubled Kiritsugu most at the moment was the search for Waver Velvet's headquarters. Although Emiya Kiritsugu was aware of the methods by which a magus may conceal himself, he could not have guessed that a Master might have boarded in a civilian house straight away.

"What is the chance that Tousaka Tokiomi has such information?" Maiya replied, "Tousaka Tokiomi had conducted

various preparations from the beginning of the War of the Holy Grail. The agreement with the Supervisor is an example; moreover—" here, Maiya paused and discreetly noted Irisviel's expression. She, who was silent, appeared to have thought the same as Maiya. "—Moreover, we think Tousaka is also secretly controlling Assassin's Master, Kotomine Kirei. If he can still influence Kotomine Kirei, his invitation may hold some advantage for us."

"Kotomine Kirei ..." It was the first time Saber heard this name, but the solemn and heavy expressions on Irisviel's and Maiya's faces told her all about this man's significance.

"Heed this, Saber." Her voice oddly stiff, Irisviel said, "In this War of the Holy Grail, if there is one who can defeat Kiritsugu and obtain the Holy Grail, it would be this man, Kotomine Kirei. Kiritsugu had said so himself. He had locked his sights on Kirei from the beginning."

Maiya and Irisviel had not said much, but Saber's understanding of Kotomine Kirei was very clear. Now that they spoke of him, Saber recalled the mysterious attacker who had hurt Irisviel and Maiya badly during the battle in the Einsbern forest.

With a resolute tone, Irisviel declared. "The alliance aside, we need to prod at the intelligence in Tousaka's hands. Let me go to Fuyuki Church to confirm it tonight."

Saber had no reply. Her attention was now focused on Kotomine. If even Kiritsugu considered him a nemesis, he surely deserves such special attention.

"—Right, Saber. You have a job today too." Saber was rather confused when Maiya suddenly called to her.

"Oh?"

"Yes. Since you can handle that Mercedes, I've prepared a mechanical prop even more fitting for guerrilla warfare, according to Kiritsugu's orders."

Hearing this, Saber's interest was piqued. "That's good. A machine more suited to battle than a car would be a big help for me."

"It's parked outside right now. See if you can handle it."

"I'll go right now."

Saber left the storeroom, an expectant spring in her step. Maiya, expressionless as usual, watched her leave. She sighed in her heart, knowing that Saber was in all appearance just an ordinary girl, and hardly the image of the King of Knights, Arturia. In an ordinary setting, Saber would be a rather short but mature girl; no one would believe that she was the king of glorious victory from that battle-ravaged history.

Maiya rarely let her mind ponder such meaningless emotions outside of work. She was about to mutter something to herself—an event rarer still—when she heard something fall beside her. Turning her head she saw that Irisviel, sitting in the magic circle earlier, was once again lying on the ground. Her state was very unusual. Sweat was pouring from her pallid face; her breathing was painful and fast.

"Ma-madam, what's wrong?!" Maiya hurriedly took irisviel in her arms. The slender body was abnormally hot.

"... Did Saber ... see this?" Irisviel asked bitterly without fear or shame. She seemed to have no questions about these sudden abnormalities happening to her body.

"Madam, your body—just what . . ."

". . . Hehe, you actually look . . . rather cute . . . when you're panicking, Maiya."

"What are you talking about? It's not the time for this. I'll get Saber and Kiritsugu here immediately. Please stay awake!"

Maiya made to stand up, but Irisviel reached out and pressed down on her shoulder.

"This is normal; it has been . . . predetermined a long time ago. It is already a miracle that I've been here as a human for so long."

Sensing deeper meaning in her words, Maiya calmed herself. She was still nervous, but she had recovered her usual cool. ". . . Does Kiritsugu know?"

Irisviel nodded, and softly added, "but Saber . . . does not know. She still has important battles to face . . . don't let her worry about anything else."

With a deep sigh, Maiya once again let Irisviel's body lie quietly face-up within the magic circle. She knew this was the position for a homunculus to fully rest.

". . . Should I also pretend not to know about this?"

"No, Maiya . . . I have something to say to you. Is that all right?"

Maiya nodded, stood up, and looked outside the storeroom. Having made sure Saber was no longer in the courtyard, she quietly closed the door and returned to Irisviel's side.

"Okay. Saber can't hear us now."

Irisviel nodded, adjusted her rapid breathing, and said calmly.

"I am the homunculus designed for Heaven's Feel . . . you should know this."

"Yes."

"I am the guardian of the vessel. My duty is to manage and transport the vessel prepared for the Holy Grail's descent. Actually, that's not completely accurate. During the previous Heaven's Feel, not only did Grandfather Acht lose his Servant, the precious vessel of the Grail was also broken during the war. In the third Heaven's Feel, the vessel was damaged before the victor was decided, and the war became meaningless. At that point, my grandfather reflected on those mistakes, and decided to protect the vessel inside a self-managing humanoid structure with a consciousness."

She recounted these things in a nonchalant voice, as if they had nothing to do with her. She had already seen through everything. "And that is—me, the vessel granted an instinct to live. To enable the vessel to avoid danger by itself, Grandfather made the vessel into me, Irisviel."

"How could that be . . .? Then, you . . ."

Maiya's heart was not cold as a rock. Faced with this account, she could not help but lose her composure.

"Three Servants have already been defeated in battle, and the war will end very soon. The vessel within me will place greater pressure on this unnecessary outer appearance in time to come. Soon, I will, gradually and without a doubt, be unable to move, until finally—I wouldn't even be able to talk to you like this, Maiya."

Biting her lower lip, Maiya was silent for a while, and she carefully repeated her previous questions once again. "Does

Kiritsugu really know everything? Does he know what kind of situation you're currently in?"

"Yes, and that is why he gave me Saber's scabbard, Avalon • All is a Distant Utopia. Are you aware of its abilities?"

"The ability to stop aging and limitlessly heal the wielder—that's what I heard."

"It prevented the peeling of my outer shell. I originally thought I would be overcome very quickly, but thanks to it, I can still maintain a human appearance and behave like a human until now. If the distance between Saber and I increased, the situation would suddenly worsen . . ."

She was already unable to get up. With Irisviel in such a state, sunken almost to the edge of death, Maiya could not but lower her eyes. She could not imagine Saber's response had she been here. That model of chivalry suffered no pain of her own, but the pain of others. If she knew of the sacrifice required for her victory, she might not be able to grasp the holy sword like before.

". . . Why are you telling me this?" Maiya asked.

Irisviel only smiled peacefully.

"Hisau Maiya—you're the only one who won't pity me. You'd definitely agree . . . that's what I believe."

Maiya gazed at her smile silently, and nodded.

"Madam, I . . . I had thought you were someone very hard to get close to."

"No such thing—can you understand me?"

"Yes." Maiya nodded without hesitation. Born as a human but living as a machine, she could understand and agree with this woman, made as a machine but facing her end as a human.

"Irisviel, I will protect you till the end, even if I am to give up this life of mine. So, for Kiritsugu's sake, please stay alive—for the fulfilment of that man's dream."

"Thank you . . ."

Stretching out a shaking hand, Irisviel grasped Hisau Maiya's hand.

– 62:48:35

The twin black eyes that stared at him from chest level were like a pair of jewels. Yes—that was the truth; Tousaka Tokiomi once again felt it himself. This girl is the ultimate treasure that the Tousaka family obtained after five generations, a rare shining gem; a miracle: Tousaka Rin. Though young, her looks already destined her to be a beauty. Rather than getting her looks from her mother, Rin bore more similary to Tokiomi's mother in her own youth.

It was dusk; the veil of night has yet to fall.

Arriving at the Zenjou house where his wife was, Tokiomi did not plan to step inside. Right now, he was one of the Masters seeking the Grail, and had long entered the realm of Shuras. To protect his wife and daughter, he had entrusted them to the Zenjous. This realm allowed no blood or gore to invade.

With a nervous expression, Rin gazed at her father, who had called her out of the door, but spoke not a word. Her father had not come just to see her, but arrived with something very important—she understood it instinctively. He had originally decided not to see his daughter until the end of the war, but Risei's sudden death last night had caused his determination to waver. The old priest was his father's good friend, and he had watched Tokiomi grow up. Under the secret pact sealed between the two parties, he was there to cover Tokiomi's back. For Tokiomi, this was the biggest factor that gave him sure confidence in victory.

Of course, Tokiomi would not be put at a loss so easily. But a dark cloud of uncertainty now stood on the road to victory which he had believed wholeheartedly in till now. His confidence had been decimated, cut down like the experienced, stubborn priest. Till yesterday, victory in Heaven's Feel seemed to be in the bag for Tokiomi. However, the death of his trustworthy companion, now brought him to prepare himself to fight on the gunpowder-covered battlefield.

What if . . . this was the last time he talked to Rin? The young girl now before him, what should he say?

"..."

Rin swallowed, staring at her father, and waited for him to speak to her. Tokiomi knew the respect and longing his daughter felt toward him, her father. He knew that the words he spoke to her that night would decide Rin's road from now on. No—there was no doubt of the future; it had all been decided long ago. Rin had no choice but to inherit the title of the sixth head of the Tousaka family. The thought brought Tokiomi a smidge of guilt toward his daughter.

He knelt down, and put his hand on Rin's head. Her eyes widened with surprise. Tokiomi remembered then that he had never caressed his daughter's head like this before. Such a reaction was only normal. Tokiomi also discovered for the first time that he had no words to express his gentleness to his daughter.

"Rin . . . put the Association in your debt by the time you mature. I'll let you decide what to do after that. You should be able to take care of yourself."

Though initially doubtful and speechless, once he opened his mouth, he began to speak on and on. He had thought of many possibilities, and things to be passed on; How to manage the treasures—his jewels—in the house, and the rules of the basement workshop inherited from the Great Teacher, and other such things. Tokiomi focused on key points and recounted them to Rin, who listened with intent. No Magic Crest was transferred, but Rin had effectively been appointed as the next head of the Tousaka house already.

Tousaka Tokiomi was no genius. Compared with his ancestors, his talents were mediocre at best. He became a skilled and respected magus largely by his loyal obedience of the family creed. That was why he could always be confident and elegant. To achieve a ten-fold result, he had to put in twenty-fold effort and practice. Elegantly and composedly passing all sorts of cruel training—that had become Tokiomi's creed. He was perhaps better than others in only two ways: complete self-control and self-restraint.

His father, who was both his teacher and the previous head of the household, should already have foreseen the hard journey his son would embark upon in the pursuit of magecraft. Therefore, when his forebear passed the Magic Crest onto Tokiomi, he had repeatedly asked his son—"will you inherit the family business?"

The questions were mere ritual, and only for show. As the only son, Tokiomi's education since childhood had been about how to become a leader. That pride, nurtured since childhood, shoved aside all other dreams in his life. Even so — this method of 'asking' was still practised; Tokiomi's ability to choose was still

incomplete. Thinking back, this was the best gift that his father had given him as the previous head of the family. Tousaka Tokiomi walked the way of magecraft by his own will, choosing not to be swayed by fate. This preparation gave Tokiomi his iron will. What supported him through the days of merciless, strict practice ever since was that proud overconfidence of choosing his own way of life.

If he could pass that treasure to his daughter—Tokiomi thought sadly. But that was already impossible. There were no choices open to Rin and Sakura in the first place. One of them had all elements, possessing five multiple elements as her alignment. The other had no elemental alignment, possessing only Imaginary Numbers. Both sisters had rare potential that could be considered miraculous, surpassing the limits of so-called natural talents or inborn skill; it was almost like a curse. A magical nature gathers magical powers to it. Prominent people far outside the rules inevitably gather equally extraordinary experiences. This cannot be controlled by one's own will. There is only one way to deal with such a destiny—consciously walk away from the rules.

Apart from understanding and practicing the way of magecraft, there was no other way to deal with the magical powers in the blood of Tokiomi's daughters. Moreover, the protection of the Tousaka house could only be endowed on one of them. This fact tormented Tokiomi for a long time. The one who did not become the inheritor would be mired in all kinds of odd evens because of her blood, and trouble was bound to find her. If the Association discovered such people, they would definitely preserve her in formaldehyde as a specimen in the name of protection.

For that reason, the Matous' request to take in Sakura as their adopted daughter was nothing short of a godsend. He had found a way to have both his beloved daughters inherit first-class magecraft, unconstrained by their bloodline's consequence, and carve out their own existence. At that time, Tokiomi could be said to be freed from the heavy burden of being a father.

But can it really be achieved? Tokiomi did not even have that confidence. The question continued to torment him. Rin, with her talents, should find it easier to understand the mysteries of magecraft. Unlike him, who embarked on this road by his own choice, it would be unbearably painful for her if she tried to escape her destiny, but ultimately still ended up on the path of magecraft. If he was unable to give any guidance on the trials Rin would face, simply disappearing like this—could such a man be considered a fitting father?

Holding back the confusion in his heart, Tokiomi once again condensed all his thoughts into the hand he had put on Rin's head. Rin let his large hand caress her head, but her jet-black eyes remained unmovingly on her father. There was not a sliver of anxiety or doubt in that look.

"—Aah, really." This unconditional reverence and trust finally brought answers for Tokiomi.

There was no need to apologize to this child or worry about her future path. Facing the proud child of the Tousaka family, he of the previous generation, about to pass away, needed to entrust nothing else.

"Rin, the Holy Grail will appear eventually. It is our duty as the Tousaka family to win it. More importantly—if you want to be a magus, you can't avoid it."

The girl nodded adamantly. The look in her eyes filled Tokiomi's chest with pride. He had not felt this kind of pride even when he inherited his position as family head.

"I have to get going now. You know what to do now, right?"

"Yes—take care, Father." Rin answered resolutely with a clear voice. Tokiomi nodded and stood up. Lifting his head, he cast one look inside the house and happened to catch Aoi's eyes; she was standing by the window and peering out. His eyes spoke of trust and encouragement, and her eyes responded with thankfulness and reassurance. With that gesture, Tokiomi turned his back on his wife and daughter and left the Zenjou house without a backward glance.

Confusion is the shadow of a restless heart. That is far from elegance. Remember the family creed in your heart; Rin's sight told him that once again. If he still had regrets toward his daughter, it must be from his failure, and from the self that could not fulfill his long-cherished wish through the Holy Grail.

To be a father who can lift his head up high and puff his chest out proudly in front of Rin, Tousaka Tokiomi must become a perfect and flawless magus. Only then could he complete the magecraft of the Tousaka family with his own two hands. He must become a father fit to teach and guide his daughter; a truly perfect father.

With fresh decisiveness, Tousaka Tokiomi embarked on the return journey at dusk, heading toward Fuyuki once again. Soon, the veil of night would descend.

– 58:16:21

Naturally, Tousaka Tokiomi had limited the number of people allowed to attend the meeting at Fuyuki Church. Apart from the Master and Servant, both sides could also bring a supporter along. Irisviel, who found it difficult to act alone, never expected such a condition to exist. She could not rely solely on Saber's strength were a fight to break out. Maiya at her side would put her much more at ease. One other person from the Tokiomi camp also attended. Though Tokiomi introduced him with utmost normalcy, their expressions could not help but change a little.

"Let me introduce Kotomine Kirei, my student. He had once competed against you, but that is now in past. He has lost his Servant, and given up the rights of a Master for a long time." *Is that all?* Irisviel cast a dubious look at the other man, but Tokiomi was calm and seemed to have said his piece. Perhaps he was underestimating the opponent. Or perhaps he really was unaware of the feud between Irisviel and Kotomine Kirei.

Saber, leaning against the wall behind Tokiomi and the others, glared unblinkingly at the red-eyed Servant. Tonight, Archer had dispelled his battle array and dressed in contemporary fashion instead. Though the outfit, decorated with leather and lacquer, was distastefully glamorous, it was not incongruous with the overwhelming presence of the golden Heroic Spirit.

The blood-red eyes stripped Saber's clothes with their sight, licking and caressing her soft skin. Blatant lust seeped from his

gaze. Saber was stirred to draw her sword, but she endured it with her consideration of Irisviel's position.

"I am immensely thankful to see you safely arrived." Tokiomi started the meeting anxiously. It was unclear if he had noticed the three women. "This Heaven's Feel is finally about to enter the most important stage. The only ones left are the Masters of the Three Families of the Beginning, and one sudden intruder—do you of the Einsbern family have any thoughts on this?"

"No." Answering in a cold and clear voice, Irisviel audaciously continued. "We have on our side the strongest Servant, so there's no need to stealthily grasp every available opportunity. It is enough for us to simply stride toward victory like this."

"Is that so—?" Tokiomi could not help laughing provocatively. "Then, please allow me to speak my thoughts. Leaving aside our respective strengths, let us talk about Berserker and Rider first. Of course, our final goal is to keep only the Three Families of the Beginning and therefore ensure the right of possessing the Grail in the final battle. Unfortunately, a strategic mistake by the Matou family resulted in a prana-hungry Servant being contracted to a weak Master. I fear that they will meet their demise soon enough. Between them, the victorious one will likely be Rider. I guess you should also know the might of that Heroic Spirit Alexander." Tokiomi paused, waiting for Irisviel to react. She remained silent, and Tokiomi continued speaking. "A newcomer who suddenly popped out of nowhere dares to stretch his hands towards the Holy Grail, the goal of two thousand years of longing; does Einsbern not feel uncomfortable about this?"

"Speaking of newcomers, are not the Tousakas and Matous included as well?" Iriviel would normally not speak so unscrupulously, but her strategy tonight was to completely suppress Tokiomi. With her daily gentleness and demureness discarded, she seemed as inviolable as a beautiful and adamant queen, confronting Tokiomi. But Tokiomi would not succumb with this. His smile still betrayed nothing, and his expression wavered not a bit.

"What Einsbern wishes is only to achieve the Third Magic. Would it not fit those intentions to entrust the Holy Grail to me, Tousaka Tokiomi, with my goal of reaching Akasha'?"

Irisviel gave a contemptuous sneer. "Would a Tousaka beg just to rob the Holy Grail from our hands?"

"Huh . . . though the explanation would cast doubt on one's moral character, it doesn't matter. Right now, one who knows nothing about the Grail has a chance of obtaining the final victory. I would definitely not allow the Holy Grail to fall into layman hands—our opinions should agree on this point."

To put it simply, the one Tokiomi considered most threatening was Rider. Irisviel agreed on that point. It was about time for her to state her position.

"We Einsbern have never had the habit of alliance. It is a laughable practice. But if you wish to fight one on one, we would be glad to honor it."

". . . Go on."

"We will regard Tousaka as our enemy only after all other Masters are defeated—such an agreement would be fine with us."

Irisviel's roundabout way of speaking made Tokiomi nod his head coldly.

"A ceasefire agreement with conditions. It is appropriate for us both."

"We have two demands," Irisviel followed up quickly. "Firstly, give us the information you have on Rider's Master." Tokiomi sniggered in his heart when he heard this. She must really want to defeat Rider herself. It was completely within his expectations.

"Kirei, tell them." Kirei, waiting silently aside, began to explain flatly.

"Rider's Master is an apprentice magus named Waver Velvet, who studied under Kayneth. He now lives in the home of an old couple surnamed MacKenzie in Miyama city, at Nakagoe 2-chome. They are an ordinary family unrelated to Heaven's Feel, but under Waver's hynosis magecraft they believe him to be their own grandson."

Irisviel and Maiya could not help but shiver. Though they had guessed as much, they did not think that Kirei, who had once controlled Assassin, could undertake a war of intelligence so thoroughly.

"... All right. What's the other condition?" Tokiomi urged delightedly. Irisviel stared straight at him with a solemn and heavy expression, and spoke without room for refusal. "The second condition—is to eliminate Kotomine Kirei from Heaven's Feel." Tokiomi gaped at this. Kirei remained nonplussed, eyebrows perfectly still. "I do not mean to see him dead. He just needs to leave Fuyuki—no, Japan—before the war finishes. We hope to see him depart tomorrow morning."

"Any reason?" Tokiomi calmed himself and asked. Irisviel could read his face very clearly; teacher and student were estranged, and it was obvious that Tokiomi did not know what Kirei did exactly. "That Executor has a feud with us Einsbern. There can be no trust within us with him in your camp—we will initiate hostility against you first, uniting with Rider et al. if necessary."

There was no hint of humor in Irisviel's tone. Tokiomi, realizing the gaps in his knowledge, cast a doubtful look at Kirei beside him. "What's going on, Kirei?"

Kirei remained silent, wearing an expressionless mask. His silence explained plenty. With a sigh, Tokiomi once again hid his emotions and gazed at Einsbern with a nonchalant expression. "As the substitute of the late Father Risei, Kirei had inherited the job of the Supervisor. If you believe he must leave, then we have a condition too."

Silently, Irisviel inclined her head and motioned for him to continue. "—I observed last night's battle. That Saber of yours has a Noble Phantasm with overwhelmingly destructive power. We hope you can restrain her use of it."

Now Saber furrowed her brows. Tousaka wished to forcibly push the duel with Rider onto her. This extra condition was too unreasonable. "Why are you interfering with our battle tactics?"

"We are the managers of Fuyuki. If Heaven's Feel is to escape the concealment of the Holy Church and proceed openly, I hope to avoid any unnecessary disturbances."

At this moment, Maiya suddenly interrupted. "Had Saber's Noble Phantasm caused damage to the surrounding structures last night?"

"—Luckily, the damage was minimal; there was a large ship in the path of her attack. However, one mistake would indeed have flattened all the houses on the opposite river bank."

"*We* placed the ship there." Hearing Maiya's words, Saber's eyebrows twitched. Indeed, the ships shielding had enabled her to use Excalibur without worry. But she only knew now that it was prepared by Kiritsugu. "As an aside, we have confirmed that the ship's owner has purchased insurance on it. The Einsbern camp has thoroughly considered the destructive power of Saber's Noble Phantasm without your reminding."

"I'm asking you to put your so-called consideration into a treaty." Tokiomi interrupted Maiya's words brusquely. "It is hereby unconditionally forbidden to use Noble Phantasms on ground level in Fuyuki city. In the air, their use is likewise forbidden if it would indirectly cause harm to residents—can you agree to this condition, Master of Einsbern?"

"... If I agree, would Kotomine Kirei really leave Japan?"

"Ah, I assure you of it, and you may hold me accountable." Tokiomi nodded without hesitation. Beside him, Kirei gritted his teeth tightly.

Irisviel turned to consult Saber, who nodded in approval. She also did not want her Noble Phantasm to create unnecessary sacrifices. If her concerns were Tokiomi's, this would not be particularly restrictive.

"—Very well. Since you agree to the condition, we also agree to a ceasefire."

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After the meeting, Kotomine Kirei remained alone in the church. As Tokiomi had said, Kirei was managing the aftermath all around Fuyuki City as a member of the Church. His father's death had broken the chain of command on-site, and there was no time to wait for an official successor from the Assembly of the Eighth Sacrament.

However, work at each scene now progressed methodically after appropriate directions were given to the teams at each spot. Risei's standing orders were effective indeed. Kirei's job was simply to follow the trail laid down by Risei, only assigning them their duties; nothing particularly difficult.

But now, he had to make a decision concerning his work. He had understood the precariousness of his situation on sensing Tokiomi's intention of allying with the Einsberns. His decision at the meeting was not surprising either. The Einsbern women—and Emiya Kiritsugu, the true manipulator—realized the threat Kirei posed, but Tousaka only thought him an ordinary assistant—the alliance with Einsbern was obvisouly more important to him than to Kirei.

Moreover, Tokiomi had not learnt of the Command Seals which reappeared on Kirei's arm, or of the Command Seals which he had inherited from Risei. Neither had Kirei told him that Saber's real Master, Emiya Kiritsugu, had yet to make an appearance, or that Matou Kariya had been saved—he had effectively discarded his duties as Tokiomi's subordinate and it was only a matter of time before he found out. Kirei had no right to complain about this turn of events.

Having called the employees distributed everywhere by phone, Kirei returned to his room alone. He sat down on the edge of the bed, feeling the quiet stillness of the empty church. Staring into the darkness, he questioned himself. He had done so countless times before, but the question really pressed down on him tonight. This time, he had to reach an answer before dawn.

Just what is my wish?

Among the vast amount of information the employees passed on while cleaning up the aftermath, there were two that Kirei could not ignore.

First—an adult male body, dead from curious causes, had appeared in public view at the riverside, where the situation stirred up by Caster's demon had sank into chaos. The corpse had been taken by the Holy Church instead of handed over to the police. The severe facial damage prevented its identification, but from the traces of the Command Seals on its right hand, it was very likely Caster's Master, Uryuu Ryuunosuke. Cause of death —injuries from two rifle bullets of caliber exceeding 30MM.

The other report was even more shocking. Just a few hours ago, the bodies of Kayneth El-Melloi Archibald and Sola-Ui Nuada-Re Sophia-Ri had been found at an abandoned factory on the outskirts of Shinto. Patrolling church employees had found them and dealt with the situation appropriately. A Self-Geis Scroll, signed and subsequently discarded, was found at the scene —naked evidence of the perpetrator's despicable means of killing Lancer's Master.

Emiya Kiritsugu, the cruel and emotionless hunting machine, was eliminating his opponents one by one. He was afraid that

Kiritsugu was still continuing the war somewhere out there. Unlike Kirei, who was immobilized by the circumstances, he was stepping toward the Holy Grail pressingly. The battlefield of Fuyuki had, after a nine-year silence, brought forth a man devoted to hollow battles. Yet, was he now to leave this place right on the verge of discovering his intentions and reasons?

What did he hope to fulfill through the omnipotent wish-granting vessel? Would that answer fill the emptiness in Kirei's heart?

"... Who are you?" He suddenly muttered to himself. He had once looked forward to meeting Emiya Kiritsugu with prayer-like ferventness, expecting an answer. Now, he sensed danger instead. The women who stood before Kiritsugu protecting him crisscrossed his mind. Why would they risk their lives for Kiritsugu? Or had Kiritsugu sunk so low that he could share his own goal with others?

A presence stirring in the deep quietness interrupted his thoughts, approaching him from the corridor outside his door. It was a presence he had become well-acquainted with. Though he walked silently, he did not conceal his aura of flamboyant majesty. Were he to step into the realm of gods, he would be just as obstinate and unrestrained.

Archer stepped into Kirei's room without knocking. Seeing Kirei deep in thought, he sneered with a sarcastic and pitiful tone.

"What are you thinking of at this stage? There should be limits to slowness."

"... You let Tokiomi-sensei go back on his own, Archer?"

"I was with him until he entered the house. Pests more treacherous than Assassin have been lurking the night lately."

Kirei nodded. Emiya Kiritsugu would not ignore the meeting; he would definitely seek an opportunity to act during Tokiomi's journey to or from the meeting. Kirei had briefed someone thoroughly about that—not to Tokiomi, but to Archer.

"But you are earnest indeed, worrying about your lord despite the worsening of your own situation."

"This is a logical decision. My duty to Tokiomi-sensei is long over, and there is no reason left to stay in Fuyuki."

"—You're not really thinking that, are you?" Archer's gaze seemed to have seen through everything. Silently, Kirei gazed back at him. Knowing the truth in Archer's words, he did not rebuke. He would be preparing to leave otherwise, instead of sitting here like a fool.

"Even now, the Holy Grail calls to you, and you too long to keep fighting." Kirei remained silent, giving up any chance of rebuttal. He could hide nothing before Archer, who had seen through his deception of everyone including himself. Perhaps the answer Kirei had sought was also within his heart.

The red eyes seemed to be gazing at little white mice, wandering lost and perplexed. There was no inducement, nor was there salvation; perhaps appreciating the worries of others delighted the King of Heroes.

"I've been looking into one question as long as I can remember." Kirei now stood up before Archer, confessing to the darkness in his heart. "Wasting time, enduring the pain . . . but it

all ended fruitlessly. I have never feel closer to the answer than I have now. What I seek must be at Fuyuki, at the end of the war."

With those words, Kirei once again understood just what drove him till today. A long time ago, before he became Tousaka Tokiomi's hound, he stirred dissent just for himself.

"Despite so much self-reflection, why do you remain perplexed?" Archer asked coldly. Kirei lowered his head and looked at his open hands, then covered his face as though in a sigh. "I have an ominous premonition—once I have obtained all the answers, I will be on the path to annihilation."

If the expectation that was endowed on Emiya Kiritsugu was not fulfilled, and he could find nothing in Matou Kariya's either . . . Kirei would have to face it then. He could only face what he discovered in the deaths of his father and his wife.

He should just turn around and leave, as Tousaka Tokiomi's deferent disciple until the very end. It would look better on the surface. Forget everything, ask nothing, demand nothing, live a busy, mundane life like a vegetable. Whatever the cost, he would at least be able to rest in peace.

"—Don't think of such boring things, you fool." Archer's reminder interrupted the thought he had almost been prepared to fulfil. "You would not be so troubled if you could change your life so easily. Having questioned things all his life, you will die with those questions unanswered. You will receive no answer, and you will not rest in peace."

". . ."

"Perhaps I should congratulate you. You're finally about to arrive at the destination after such a lengthy journey."

"... You would congratulate another, Archer?"

Archer inclined his head. There was no sentimentality on his face, but it sparkled with an innocent and joyous light, like a child observing an ant hill. "I should have told you that observing humanity's cause and retribution is most interesting entertainment. I, the king, wholeheartedly look forward to the moment you come face to face with your destiny."

At the King of Heroes' gallant words, Kirei gave a bitter laugh. "Is it really so fun to live stubbornly for enjoyment?"

"If you're jealous, you can try to live a little like this too. Once you comprehend what enjoyment is, you will no longer fear annihilation."

The phone rang in the priest's office in the corridor outside. it did not seem to surprise Kirei in the least. He walked out of the room, picked up the receiver, disconnected the phone after a few words, and returned to the room.

"—What's wrong?"

"It's a call from the employees of the Holy Church who originally worked under my father. They now report everything to me."

Seeing that Kirei's unusually relaxed expression, Archer furrowed his brows and asked. "Any good news?"

"You could say that. This news is quite decisive." Kirei hesitated a little, but chose to tell. "I sent men to tail the Einsbern participants after the meeting, telling them it was Risei's order before he passed away. With that, I have found their hiding place."

Archer was stunned for a little while. Then, laughing heartily, he broke out into applause. "Honestly, Kirei, you really are—! Haven't you already made up your mind ages ago?" He was still using his authority to detect the movements of the enemy camps; it would be impossible for him not to join the fight. Though Kirei was still anxious, the battle strategy had made concrete advancements.

But he had not made the mental preparations just then—just a few minutes ago.

"I was once lost and on the verge of giving up. But in the end—King of Heroes, it is as you said: One like me can only live on with questions." As Kirei spoke, he rolled up his sleeves and revealed the two Command Seals on his left lower arm. They would allow Kirei to once again make a contract with a Servant.

The Command Seals inherited from his father covered his entire right arm. The innumerable Command Seals, yet to confirm a target for a contract, could be forged into neutral prana and used to restrain Servants as well; they could be used as mock Magic Crests, and were expandable. The magecraft Kirei now possessed rivalled famous magecraft houses that had collected their Crests over many generations. Kirei's preparation was more than enough for him to continue participating in the ongoing Heaven's Feel. There was no greater good, no illusory glory on the road before him. His own battle was about to start. To fill his own nihility, to confirm the capacity of his own emptiness, he would question Emiya Kiritsugu, Matou Kariya, and the wish-granting vessel, the Holy Grail.

"Hahahaha! Kirei, it's abrupt, but I have a few questions." Archer laughed madly and arrogantly. The blood-red eyes insinuated a prank, glinted an evil shade.

"If you've really decided to participate in the War of the Holy Grail, you would become Tousaka Tokiomi's enemy. You are currently defenseless, in the same room with an enemy Servant. Isn't this just awful?"

"Not necessarily. I do have ways to keep myself alive."

"Oh?" Archer, interested, narrowed his eyes.

Kirei spoke calmly. "Since I am now opposing Tokiomi-sensei, I have no need to conceal his lies anymore. Gilgamesh, let me tell you the truth of Heaven's Feel that you knew nothing of."

"... What did you say?" Hearing this, Archer furrowed his brows, perplexed. Kirei proceeded to speak of the truth of the Heaven's Feel he had learned from Tokiomi.

"The miracle that occurs within this world has no effect outside of the world. The fight over the wish-granting vessel is only a camouflage; the Three Families of the Beginning have other plans. The ceremony which had originally been held in Fuyuki was an attempt to sacrifice the souls of seven Heroic Spirits to open the road to the Radix. The promise to fulfil a miracle was only bait used to attract Heroic Spirits. The current Heaven's Feel has lost its original meaning; it is now nothing but an empty shell." The secret was known only to the Matous, Tousakas, and Einsberns, and related people; the foreign Masters and all the Servants were oblivious to this truth. "This time, the only magus who wishes to fulfil the once long-cherished wish of the Three Families of the Beginning is Tousaka Tokiomi. He wants to kill all seven Servants

to activate the Greater Grail. That's right; kill all seven Servants. Do you understand now? That's why Tokiomi-sensei was so stingy with his Command Seals. He can only use two Command Seals in the battle with other Masters. The last one is needed to order his own Servant to commit suicide once everything is finished."

Archer heard him without interruption, then questioned with lowered voice and extreme apathy. ". . . You're telling me that the loyalty Tousaka Tokiomi had shown to me was all deceit?"

Kirei, knowing his teacher's character, slowly shook his head. "He does indeed have the utmost respect for Gilgamesh, the King of Heroes. However, that is not the case for the Servant Archer. You're only a representation, not too far from a statue or portrait which receives the admiring looks of passers-by from its place of exhibition in a gallery. But once removed from that spot, it earns no such respect. That is to say, Tokiomi-sensei is a magus to the end. For him, a Servant is just a tool. He once told me that even if he admired Heroic Spirits, he harbored no illusions of idols."

Hearing Kirei's account, Archer nodded dramatically as if in sudden realization, then once again reverted to his usual evil smile. It spoke of cruelty within tolerance, decisiveness within boldness; it was the smile of a king who was an absolute existence, who could decide everything with just one word. "Tokiomi—today I've finally discovered your worth. Even that boring man can make me so delighted." The meaning hidden beneath those words would freeze one's blood.

"King of Heroes, what do you plan to do? Will you still remain loyal to Tokiomi-sensei, and punish my betrayal?"

"Yes, what should I do? Although he has been disloyal to me, Tokiomi is, after all, my prana provider. Moreover, where would I get a perfect Master—" Archer stopped speaking, and suddenly gazed at Kirei with a cold expression. "It seems there is a Master here with Command Seals, but without a Servant."

"That is true." Replying Archer's naked lure with a smile, Kirei lowered his head. "But is that man worthy to be graced with the favor of the King of Heroes?"

"Certainly. Although he is not flawless, there is enough potential. Perhaps he will let me enjoy myself thoroughly."

That was all it took. The final Master and Servant chosen by fate exchanged smiles with each other for the first time.

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It was lost in an abyss of shallow slumber, within the darkness sealed in the bottomless earth. What it dreamt of in the shallow slumber were the endless prayers, unreasonable and unattainable, that have been entrusted a long time ago. A beautiful world. A beautiful life. A flawless soul. Such longings were too strong; they had to entrust all other evils to one place—that was the wish of fragile men.

Through answering these prayers, it had once saved a world. There is no evil other than I. There is no imperfection save for I. I am the only one who should be hated. I am the only one who should be abhorred. In this manner, it had saved the world, and obtained peace for them. Therefore—

It was not a saint which saved men and aided the world. Without praise, without reverence, without tribute, but only with spurning, only cursing, only disdain . . . before it knew it, even its human name had been rubbed away. It was left with a title of its way of existence, and finally it became a concept passed down through the ages. Until now, that had already became a dream of memories that had had its full share of time's baptism. Just how much time had passed since then?

Right now, it was thinking dazedly on the bed it had slept peacefully on. It felt like some complicated changes had occurred. That's right; it was about sixty years ago. Something had happened almost in the blink of an eye. It had happened so suddenly, there was no time to understand everything completely. When it came to, it was already in a place like a mother's warm womb, an infinite darkness that sighed in the deepest place beneath the earth.

Then, it had been a place concealing an egg of endless possibility. One day, like a seed, it entered and planted its roots here. Since then, that place had become the abdominal cavity nurturing a darkness belonging to nothing, becoming a uterus to foster it into maturity.

Since then, it had absorbed the prana flowing in through the leylines in the earth, like a baby obtaining nourishment from a mother's placenta, while it slept in its shallow slumber. As it grew, it waited undiscovered for an opportunity, waiting to leave this scorching profound darkness one day, at the moment of delivery.

Suddenly, it perked its ears and listened for a sound. Someone had spoken.

"... All the evils of this world ... it won't matter ... gladly accept it ..."

Aaah, someone was calling it. Someone was summoning it, summoning a blessing. It had to answer him. The prana whirlpool, swelling to an incomparable size in the ancient darkness, gave it concrete form. The endless prayers entrusted in the distant past could now be fulfilled.

As the object of prayers, it would now bring about all the things that were wished for. All the pieces of the puzzle had been assembled. The gears of fate meshed and now turned bravely, accelerating toward the completion of their goal. All that was left was awaiting the opening of the birth canal.

Dreaming in its shallow slumber, it emitted cries that will dye the world crimson red. It repeated its contractions in the darkness beneath the earth, unknown to anyone else.

~Volume 3 end~

Postface

Takahashi Romeo

The third volume of *Fate/Zero* has launched its attack. Is everyone prepared?

Reading is an act of invading the book, and we would normally finish our manipulation of it with the conclusion of our reading. Like so, we recall the story in our memories as we discuss it logically. This is the way adults read. But sometimes this rule also shatters.

I had originally planned to read the book, but got read by the book instead for no apparent reason. Although planning to manipulate, I was already being manipulated when I realised it. Something like this had happened while reading *Fate/Zero* Volume 3.

Without need for further explanation, this book is a spin-off of the monstrous visual novel *Fate/Stay Night*. This volume, continuing the situation from the previous volumes, moves it

forward, makes it increasingly tortuous, and also includes signs of an even more tremendous and eventful future. It is the volume of 'change' in the flow of 'beginning, continuation, change, conclusion'. The author is the superstar of the PC gaming world, famous for his subtle way of writing—Urobuchi Gen.

In reading this book, you must have felt strongly the style of the creator of the *Fate* world, Nasu Kinoko-san, with those poignant and powerful words. At the same time, for those who are very familiar with Urobuchi Gen, you should have also smelt the very thick 'Urobuchi' scent between the passages that he had so delicately recreated in the style of the original work.

Exquisite. Overwhelmingly exquisite. Had it been his own literary work, his own topic, on his own grounds, such exquisiteness would have been understandable. However, for Urobuchi to be able to achieve such exquisiteness on someone else's home ground is simply extraordinary. This is especially so for the work of *Fate*; one must have extraordinary powers in order to dexterously use its world view.

I've been attentive to Urobuchi from his first work to his doujin activities; I have been familiar with him for a long time. However, his performance in *Fate/Zero* still leaves me stunned. The more I read, the more envious I am of him. It was evidently interesting, but there was also a bitter taste. I fell into a state of intertwined bitterness and joy. Words as neat as artwork, and those boiling, igniting souls displayed perfection of a higher class.

I sighed with feeling when I finished reading the entire book. You readers who can simply enjoy its fun are truly blessed.

All right, here ends the envy of a fellow author, and I'll talk a little about my personal thoughts.

Actually, the sentiments that boiled after reading were not of only one or two kinds. To avoid laying out fanciful words clumsily, I can only judge it coldly and impartially, while also writing what I thought in my heart.

Let's touch upon it briefly in the range allowed without spoiling it for you. The third volume is the volume of change in the story, which portrays all sorts of happenings.

Thinking of those things, and these things. And even such things? Bullying Saber is progressing extremely well.

Again, Rider, you . . .!!

Waver~~!!

A rebound attack? No, no, that . . . that's right, a waste of efforts! It's really too much!

Ahhhh, Lancer . . .

El-Melloi!

Gil-ga-me-sh. (accepted the invitation)

That's how it is. (Not understanding it at all)

No, it must be under the condition of not having spoilers . . .

After all, after I read all that, I couldn't control myself. I went out. Although I felt like a Farrari, unfortunately a Farrari only exists in my imagination, and I could only walk with the feet my parents gave me. There were no destinations. Just casually strolling.

Once in a while casting a vigilant look at pedestrians who hurry past me. My eyes beamed as I looked at the building roofs. Checking if I was being followed. Why do all that?

Obviously. Because maybe the participants of the Holy Grail War were hidden amongst them.

Yes. I planned to conduct the Holy Grail War within my brain. That was really tiresome. But that's all right. The weather today happened to be good.

. . . Therefore, in a moment of carelessness, my Noble Phantasm "Personal Delusions" was accelerated. *Fate/Zero* is truly fearsome.

The typeface used almost exclusively throughout this volume is Aldus LT Std, designed by Herman Zapf and published by Adobe Type.

The novel title is set in Palatino LT Std, from the same designer, to which Aldus LT forms a lovely book weight text face companion.

Both typefaces feature letterforms based on the humanist fonts of the Italian Renaissance. The broad-nibbed strokes lend calligraphic grace, and the text proportions make for easy reading at normal distances.

Body text is set at 12pt/16pt, while footnotes are set at 8pt/10pt.